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Halal dating: Changing relationship attitudes and experiences among young British Muslims

Many young Muslims in the UK are gaining greater control over their personal lives by finding new ways of thinking and talking about sexual relationships. One way in which they are doing this is to reclaim a previously taboo term – dating – by differentiating between haram (impermissible) and halal (permissible) forms of dating. In doing so, they draw upon ideas that are increasingly prominent in social media and creative writing, and bring these ideas and associated vocabulary to bear on their personal lives. This allows them to make their own decisions about what it is acceptable to talk about and ultimately to do, while remaining within the boundaries of their faith and identity. They are able to do this because there is limited agreement about the permissibility of many cultural practices, including those related to dating, and this leaves scope for individuals to make and argue their own choices.

To explore halal dating in everyday life, we interviewed 56 young British Muslim men and women. We found that many of these young Muslims and their friends reflect seriously on the topic of dating rather than dismissing it and that, for them, certain forms of dating can be classified as halal. Moreover, they are able to persuade friends and some family members of this, and are therefore able to broach conversations that would previously have been considered unacceptable or, at very least, embarrassing and awkward.

Part of our motivation for exploring young British Muslims' relationship practices is indicated in the report 'Young British Muslims and Relationships' by the Muslim Youth Helpline (2010). This report stressed the need to develop and disseminate better understandings of the faith and culture of young British Muslims, and to apply these understandings to issues surrounding sexual relationships:

Service providers should try to understand how faith, culture and society interact in creating the framework within which choices are made for individual people. [...] Providers should make themselves aware of the basic tenets of the Muslim faith, as well as the ceremonies and traditions of the communities (such as the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities) with whom they are working. (2010: 2)

Here the Muslim Youth Helpline unobtrusively complicates what is usually understood by agency in relationships. By flagging up the ways in which 'faith, culture and society interact', the group speaks to the work of intersectional feminists in destabilising uncritical views of sexual autonomy, by which we mean scope for agency within sexual relationships.

Agency is a complex and contested term, but for the purposes of this paper, we define it as the possibility of making a choice about how to live one's life. This 'implies volition, free will and ... choice on the part of the individual' (McDowell and Sharp, 1999, p.3). In defining agency this way, we work with Saba Mahmood's conception of agency as a 'capacity for action' (Mahmood, 2001, p.203). Choice, in this context, refers to the 'capability of actors to make decisions' based on their own interests, experiences and desires (see Burns 2015, p.198). Agency is generally seen as a good thing – 'inherently positive' (Evans 2013, p. 47) – because it denotes 'the ability for individuals to have some kind of transforming effect or impact' both in their own lives and 'on the world' around them (McNay, 2018, p.39).

Agency is unevenly distributed, such that some people have more scope than others to identify and make choices, doing so in different ways (Mahmood, 2005). It is more obvious in some contexts and more recognisable to particular observers (Kandiyoti, 2000). Conversely, agency among particular groups such as women, children and minority communities is sometimes missed, misunderstood or underestimated by outside observers (Davies, 1991). Mahmood (2001, p. 222) argues that Western feminists have been preoccupied with

particular forms of agency, expressed as the 'desire to be free from subordination' and the desire to effect 'social transformation'. She argues that their understanding of agency is fundamentally liberal: an individualistic expression of self-interest and resistance (to male domination, for example) (see also: Massad, 2015). Mahmood argues that agency takes different forms outside the liberal world: in Muslim-majority societies (such as Egypt, which she discusses) and within Muslim minorities (in western countries such as the UK). Agency does not always mean rejecting what liberal observers see as oppressive norms; it does involve selective and strategic acts and choices (Mahmood, 2005; Shankar, Das and Atwal, 2013). This calls for more differentiated understandings of agency, sensitive to the various ways in which choices are identified and made in different contexts. Taking Mahmood's argument that agency is 'constituted in different cultural and political locations' (Mahmood, 2001, p.223) as our point of departure, we shall develop an empirically informed understanding of how agency works out in a diverse society, in which Islamically-informed and liberal understandings of choice and agency coexist.

By recognising the choices that some young Muslims make in their sexual relationships, it may also be possible to challenge problematic stereotypes about Muslims, which are widespread in mainstream British society. We challenge the beliefs that young Muslims in Western countries have little control over their relationships, and that that their relationships are loveless (Chambers et al., 2018) and controlled by others: family, tradition and religion. These assumptions are being challenge through a growing body of research, which is producing more nuanced pictures of sexualities and sexual relationship practices among young Muslims in Western settings (Babayan and Najambadi, 2008; Khoei, Whelan and Cohen, 2008; Lo and Aziz, 2009; Yip, 2004). This research is highlighting changing attitudes and behaviours towards marriage in particular: different ways of getting and being married,

and of postponing and refusing marriage (Daneshpour and Fathi, 2016; Ouis, 2007). Specific themes of this empirical research include: the effects on marriage and other sexual relationships of increasing education and career advancement among Muslim women (Ahmad, 2001, 2012); the growing numbers of Muslims who have opted for same-sex relationships (Yip, 2004); the prevalence of pre-marital or extra-marital sex (Griffiths, 2015); and changing expectations and experiences of married life (Oui, 2007; Qureshi, Charsley and Shaw, 2014). Within this context, researchers have identified at least four types of arranged marriage among British Muslims, in addition to other forms of marriage (Pande, 2016; Charsley and Shaw 2006; Shaw 2006). These range from traditional arrangements, where the bride and groom have barely met before the wedding, to those in which the prospective couple have met without parental supervision and the parents' role is confined to arranging the wedding festivities. Between these lie two other forms: semi-arranged marriages and love-cum-arranged marriages. The former involves chaperoned dates to encourage the prospective couple to get to know each other before the wedding, whilst in the latter the young couple may have met independently of parental guidance and go on unchaperoned dates (Pande, 2014). The dating practices that our young research participants refer to as halal are associated with both these forms of arranged marriage.

Despite the diversity, growth and strength of this empirical work, more research is needed if we are to appreciate the ways in which Muslims are finding agency and making choices about how they live their sexual lives. Accordingly, in this paper, we present empirical research findings that: challenge stereotypes about Muslims; investigate Muslims' agency in relationships; and speak to broader questions about agency in a minority community within a diverse society.

Halal dating

Generally, the word halal refers to that which is permissible and is defined against that which is haram, or impermissible. This leaves open the question of who says what is halal or haram: the individual whose conscience is at stake, their family members, community members or peers who may judge them, religious authority figures, or some higher religious authority such as (a reading of) the sacred Islamic texts and what Allah or God would want. In this article, we pay particular attention to young Muslims' judgements about that which is permissible or impermissible. These are judgements they bring to bear on their own lives, rather than being assessments that others make and in some cases attempt to impose (Hasan, 2002). Since different people will come to different conclusions about the relationship practices that are or are not permissible in their own lives and in the lives of others around them as well as in the wider community of Muslims, it comes as no surprise that terms such as halal dating are controversial. The boundaries around the permissible are always a matter of interpretation.

By speaking about halal (and haram) dating, young Muslims are applying terms that have traditionally been more commonly associated with food consumption (Eliasi and Dwyer, 2002) and clothes (Johnson, 2017). Researchers have also acknowledged the adaptation of halal and haram to a wider set of practices including other forms of consumption (Mukhtar and Mohsin Butt, 2012), branding (Alserhan, 2010; Wilson and Lui, 2010) and finance (Mohsin Butt and Aftab, 2013). In doing so, Muslims are representing themselves in innovative ways that recognise recent interest in thinking through everyday life (see also Van Es, 2017). Furthermore, these terms have been frequently used in imaginative literature (Malik, 2015; Janmohamed, 2016). There has, however, been less scholarly and creative attention to halal and haram when it comes to relationship practices. This is not to disregard some recent and

welcome contributions that form the foundation and point of departure for this paper. These include Shanon Shah's *The Making of a Gay Muslim* (2018), which explores everyday negotiations of halal and haram in the lives of queer Muslims, and Bendixsen Synnøve's (2013) study of halal dating among Muslim women in Berlin. Asma Gull Hasan (2002: 118) draws together some of these emerging ideas and suggests that some Muslims do adopt 'creative solutions to dating'. First, she argues, there are 'strict Muslims' who, if they date at all, do so in halal ways. Second, 'Eid Muslims' – those who 'attend mosques only on holidays' – have a more relaxed attitude to dating, not always involving chaperones, but nevertheless keeping physical intimacy to a minimum. Another group, who are not strict at all in their application of religious principles, adopt a '*Sex and the City*-style' approach to dating, which does not preclude premarital sex (2002: 118-119).

The idea of halal dating is gaining increasing traction in online platforms and imaginative literature. Young Muslims who follow blogs, engage with social media and read fiction are increasingly coming across this term. YouTube celebrities such as Dina Tokio, Ameena, Ali Dawah, Froggy and Sham Idrees offer light-hearted, accessible and yet carefully judged, inoffensive commentaries on sensitive subjects such as sexuality and sexual relationships. Similarly, a host of religious media personalities such as Ustad¹ Yasmin Mogahed, Nouman Ali Khan and Mufti² Ismail Menk are speaking to young Muslims with a candour and directness around relationship issues, which many young Muslims find refreshing and entertaining. Examples of this include Mufti Menk and Ali Dawah (2016) discussing the etiquette of premarital relationships in their YouTube video entitled 'Halal Dating' and blogger Neha Rashid (2017) addressing similar themes in her post about halal dating in the United States. The tone and themes of this lively nascent online culture is mirrored in new writing for and by young Muslims, in which new pictures of sexuality and

sexual relationships are emerging. This emergent literature ranges from essays such as ‘Islamic Tinder’ by Triska Hamid (2017), to life writing including Maria Qamar’s *Trust No Aunty* (2017) and to fiction such as Ayisha Malik’s *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and Noor Al Hidayah’s (2017) self-published *Muslim Dating Disasters*. With their brightly coloured (often in shades of pink) cartoonish covers and emphasis on joyfully halal economic consumption, several of these texts are examples of what Lucinda Newns (2018) calls ‘Muslim chick lit’.

These explorations of dating – online and in print – evaluate romantic adventures that may go against the grain of tradition and the expectations of family and community members. Representations of dating are frequently light-hearted, humorous and playful, but the topic is nonetheless approached with religious gravity. In *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015), for example, dating takes place without physical intimacy, even though the characters sometimes go unchaperoned. This combination of apparently unorthodox behaviour on the one hand and the pursuit of religious integrity on the other is encapsulated in the term that some see as oxymoronic: halal dating.

That said, while the term halal dating is increasingly prominent online and in print, less is known about its significance in everyday life: its bearing upon what young Muslims say and do about dating. This raises a series of questions, which we take up in this paper. Do debates and controversies about halal dating which are prominent online and in print impact upon the lives of ordinary young Muslims? Do they know the term? If so, what does it mean to them? How do they use it, in terms of the things they say and do? Taking these questions as a launch pad, we aim to examine the concept and practice of halal dating in the quotidian lives of young Muslims in the UK.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to explore the significance (or insignificance) of halal dating in the relationship attitudes and practices of young British Muslims, we conducted a series of interviews and ran focus groups and workshops dealing with personal relationships. We scrutinised three parts of the UK which are home to substantial numbers of Muslims (Hopkins and Gale, 2009): Yorkshire, Glasgow and Tyne & Wear. In the interest of focus, we worked with one strand of Britain's diverse Muslim communities: British Muslims of Pakistani heritage. This heritage group forms the single largest component of Britain's 2.7 million Muslims, making up 43% of those in England, 33% of those in Wales and 67% of those in Scotland (ONS, 2015).

We interviewed 56 young British Muslims of Pakistani-heritage aged between 16 and 30. Doing so, we sought and achieved approximate balance between the three regions and between young people of different genders, sexualities, ages and relationship statuses. Participants were recruited through the research team's personal and organisational networks, snowball sampling and leaflet distribution. All of the interviews were recorded on a digital Dictaphone and transcribed. These interviews took place over a year beginning in May 2016. We asked interviewees about their relationship attitudes and practices. The interviews were consistent with the ethical commitments approved by the Principal Investigator's host institution. We explained the project to participants verbally and in writing through an information sheet. Participants signed a consent form and were given refer to all participants using pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. **Table 1** provides a summary of those whose transcripts are quoted in this paper.

The analytic framework, through which interview and other data were interpreted, involved theoretically informed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We drew out evidence of agency and choice, in the substantive context of dating and relationship formation, in relation

to both practices and attitudes. These two dimensions reflect Mahmood's conception of agency, which has guided our analysis, namely the 'capacity for action' (Mahmood 2001: 203). NVIVO was used to analyse the data, in which macro parent themes of dating, halal dating and meetings were identified in relation to themes of halal dating. The coding frame, which we applied to the analysis of this data, encompassed a number of terms that enabled us to draw out the ways in which young people were speaking (or hinting, or remaining silent) on the subject of dating. These coding terms included some predictable terms, which came up where people were speaking about halal dating – for example: dating, marriage, meetings, halal dating, love. We also adapted our coding frame to draw out silences, awkward moments, and areas in which interviewees were halting in the speech, through terms such as secrecy, silence, and bad experiences.

Silence and Secrecy

Before illuminating the ways in which these respondents and others like them are breaking silences by finding particular ways to talk about halal dating, it is necessary to identify these silences and their implications.

Among young British Muslims and their families and communities there is a widespread understanding that dating should not be mentioned, seen or acknowledged, either within the family or in public. The reasons for this prohibition, a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper, are both cultural and religious. Culturally, prohibitions on dating and on talking about dating are bound up with tradition and honour (Werbner, 2007). Religiously, they are grounded in assumptions and beliefs about what is permissible (halal) or impermissible (haram) within Islam.

In some families, these rules remain unwritten, whereas in others they are explicit. Unwritten rules were cited by Zarah (Female 23 Yorkshire) when she guessed and gauged her relatives' attitudes towards dating: 'I think when they hear the word dating, like: "Oh God no, that's a very Western thing, that's completely haram"' (see **Table 1** for profiles of Zarah and the other interviewees mentioned throughout this paper). Other interviewees alluded to a common knowledge alleged to be so widespread within Muslim communities that it goes without saying. As Ayisha observed, 'In our community it is frowned upon if you have got a boyfriend. It is close-knit and everybody knows everybody's business. So, if you are seen around with a boy, it will probably get home before you get back from your date' (Ayisha Female 27 Yorkshire).

Dating is more explicitly forbidden in some families than others, and this is particularly the case where daughters are concerned. Whereas the young men we interviewed were more likely to allude to 'don't ask, don't tell' attitudes towards dating, the young women tended to receive more explicit guidance about how to conduct themselves. There is a double standard in which men in Muslim and/or Pakistani or South Asian heritage families and communities are left more room for freedom than women to explore pre-marital sexual possibilities. Even though neither group is overtly encouraged into pre-marital relationships, the different rules for men and women are well documented (see Ouis, 2007). This is illustrated in Janan's family's disapproval with pre-marital relationships, which was spelled out and given Islamic justification:

My dad, from a religious point of view, didn't want us dating and he's been very vocal about that and that was with all five of our siblings. So there are four girls and one boy. My dad was very clear about that amongst all five of us, that he didn't want us

going out and having like pre-marriage relationships with anyone. (Janan Female 29 Glasgow)

Though Janan's father treated all her siblings equally, others speak of a double standard, in which girls and young women are under more pressure than their male counterparts to abstain from pre-marital relationships. Khadija explains:

[S]ex before marriage is forbidden in Islam, so obviously you don't know, you're in love with someone so deeply like you could commit the crime and like wouldn't realise it. And obviously that could, for women especially, that could like knock you back completely like with your future and getting married. (Female 19 Tyne & Wear)

Many of the young Muslims we spoke to said they and their friends and peers conform to the expectation that they do not date due to the repercussions Khadija highlights here. If they do date, they do so discreetly. Adeena spoke of knowing one young couple who 'are basically dating' and 'plan on getting married' but feel the need to seek out places where they are not likely to be recognised:

They were somewhere where they didn't know anyone and the girl turned to him and she was like 'Oh wait, no one knows us here!' and she hugged him. She's like 'Oh, can't do this normally, but no one knows us here so it's okay'. (Adeena Female 19 Yorkshire)

Ayisha, on the other hand, generalised that the majority of her friends do date, albeit in a clandestine manner: 'Most of my friends have had boyfriends and it has been like they have had a double life, so they are hiding it from home' (Ayisha Female 27 Yorkshire).

This secrecy and silence has mixed effects. When it is possible to say one thing and do another, as some Muslims do when they enter into same-sex relationships (Yip 2004), it is also possible to contain contradictions between cultural and religious conventions on the one hand, and desires and lived experiences on the other. But this silence and secrecy can be

damaging. Hawa had wanted to tell her parents about the man she was dating with a view to marriage, but was worried about how they might react. She recalled her mix of emotions: 'I think partly it was you know, my mum and my dad are probably going to reject it and then what am I going to do? Or my mum and dad aren't going to support me and they'll disown me, [for bringing] shame on the family'. Looking back, she felt that while the enforced silence had not stopped her from dating, it had nevertheless restricted her. She reflected that the repercussions from this secrecy compounded over time:

You're sat there overthinking all these different consequences that could happen and not kind of dealing with the problem at hand and kind of delaying things getting sorted and making it worse for yourself rather than just kind of nipping it in the bud earlier.

(Hawa Female 25 Yorkshire)

Some of the young people we spoke to dreamed of breaking the silence around dating. They envisaged possible scenarios and conversations, particularly with their parents, which opened up possibilities for making their own choices:

If you say it has been a year then they will get, you know, angry that you kept it for that long. So you can just say that 'I met, met him, got to know him, and he is willing to come over with his mum and dad to meet you as well'. Then your parents are like 'oh, okay'. (Ayisha Female 27 Yorkshire)

These crucially important conversations are also being rehearsed aloud: in more relaxed but still earnest conversations with peers. These exchanges, recounted in many of the interviews we conducted, broke taboos around the discussion of dating. In order to do so without compromising religious principles or alienating family members, some of the young people we spoke to drew upon the idea, increasingly being disseminated online and in print media, of halal dating.

Talking about Halal Dating

Through the language of halal dating, some young Muslims are finding it possible to discuss the hitherto unmentionable subject of premarital sexual relationships without compromising their religious principles or alienating others who uphold those principles. In this section, we explore the ways in which this term is being used. We acknowledge both its possibilities and its limitations as a source of agency for young British Muslims.

Some young Muslims regard the idea of halal dating with suspicion: as a label, a way in which people justify – to themselves and to others – actions that they have already decided they want to take. Adeena, who was critical of this tendency, argued that '[h]alal dating is just dating that people are trying to normalise. If that's what people want to call it to be comfortable with it, then call it whatever they want' (Adeena Female 19 Yorkshire). Maryam was equally sceptical of the term: 'I would say it's dating but you put halal at the front just to make it more, I don't know how to describe it, more standard for the cultural background rather than just saying you're dating someone' (Maryam Female 23 Yorkshire).

Maryam went on to say that halal dating means (or should mean) 'dating but within the boundaries' (Maryam Female 23 Yorkshire). The crucial issue here, in distinguishing between opportunistic or cynical and earnest use of the term halal dating, revolves around its boundaries, which separate permissible (halal) relations from the impermissible (haram). These boundaries are not set in stone and, on the contrary, they are negotiated: by peers as they talk about this subject, and by the individual as they examine their own conscience and religious principles. That said, most of the young people we spoke to who were aware of the idea of halal dating tended to stress a number of dimensions in which halal and haram forms of dating are distinguished, and the associated borders drawn. For most, the hallmarks of

halal dating are threefold: first, a chaperone must be present; second, there must be no physical intimacy; and, finally, there must be an intention to marry. Clearly, these three features are common to arranged marriage practices (Pande, 2014; Ahmad, 2012). However, the divergence from tradition comes from one or more of the following characteristics: selecting one's own date or marriage partner, being away from parental supervision (the chaperone may be a friend rather than a relative), the venue often being public rather than the family home, and friends or new technologies (computers, smartphones, social media platforms) sometimes facilitating the date rather than relations, 'aunties' or professional matchmakers.

Zarah explained the meaning and importance of the chaperone. 'The term halal dating is applied to meeting a future potential spouse in the presence of someone else', she said, suggesting for example that 'a guy that's related to the girl's side' should be 'present with the couple' (Zarah Female 23 Yorkshire). Looking back at her own experiences, Ayisha recognised that the way in which she dated was halal because it was chaperoned:

I've been through something that's kind of like halal dating. Where you have like, either your sister or parent with you when they introduce you to someone so that you can get to know them. But it's not you on your own with them, there has to be somebody with you at all times until you finished asking them questions.

(Ayisha Female 27 Yorkshire)

Hassan made a similar point, judging that 'I think like if I was to meet someone now, and I liked her, and there is always a chaperone everywhere we go, that is legit good' (Hassan Male 29 Yorkshire). Those who stressed the role of the chaperone provided religious reasons for doing so, though of course different individuals understand the same religion differently, and therefore must come to some of their own conclusions about what is religiously permissible.

These negotiations offer scope for choice. Iman pointed to 'rulings on whether a guy and girl should be alone', adding that a chaperone is essential, and that 'you have got sort of a chaperone with you' if your date is to be halal (Iman Female 27 Glasgow).

The second principle which many interviewees associated with halal dating is that there should be no physical intimacy. Iman explained that halal dating means 'that you don't really, you are not going to hold hands, you are not going to do anything like that [...] at least not until you are married' (Iman Female 27 Glasgow). In her choice of words – 'you don't really' rather than simply 'you don't' – Iman was less than categorical about what could or could not happen on a halal date. Similarly, Amina used the conditional mood to create ambivalence as to whether the events she described were hypothetical or related to lived experience. She spoke simply of 'avoiding' physical intimacy, exercising restraint, rather than absolutely forbidding such contact: 'I would avoid the physical intimacy part and I'd just focus on like you know, getting to know the other person' (Amina Female 19 Yorkshire). This slightly equivocal avoidance of contact is picked up in Bilal's derisive comment: 'Call it halal dating and say that oh, we're not going to touch or be intimate so there's nothing wrong with it' (Bilal Male 22 Yorkshire). Still, the avoidance of physical intimacy is almost always mentioned as characteristic of halal dating, even if this only exists as an ideal.

If it is difficult for young people to resist touching each other, there are ways of attempting the repudiation of physical intimacy. Certain people conduct their dates over the phone and online, as Amina explains:

So when some of my friends, the parents have said 'oh, this is so and so person that we want you to get to know because we think they might be a good potential spouse for you' and then they'll get to know each other over chatting to each other perhaps Facebook or over the phone or texting each other. But they won't go out of their way

to meet each other, so that might be another interpretation to what halal dating is.

(Amina Female 19 Yorkshire)

Others are using online dating sites and apps to meet and get to know others in accordance with the ideals of halal dating (Lo and Aziz, 2009). They sidestep the temptations of physical intimacy altogether by avoiding face-to-face meetings. For example:

We met through an app called Muzmatch.³ We matched each other last December, so a year ago in December. And just got talking through that. But we didn't meet up like in physical person until May [...] maybe like five months later. (Janan Female 29 Glasgow)

The third hallmark of halal dating, as the young people we spoke to understand it, is a concern with marriage. Dating can only be halal, they suggested, if there is a genuine intention to marry. Noor explained that for those with genuine religious convictions, dating cannot be an end in itself. She said that 'when you are practising or religious', conversations about marriage must take place early on: 'and you talk about, like, would you be interested in getting married?'. Once that priority is established, she continues, it is permissible to 'have that interim period where you would get to know each other' (Noor Female 27 Yorkshire). Similar views were expressed by men including Shahid, who expressed the belief that 'if you are going to date somebody you should date them with the intention that you want it to lead somewhere' (Shahid Male 24 Yorkshire) – even if this intention is not explicitly discussed in the earliest meetings.

The discussion of halal dating has spread from the online and print spaces in which the term was first aired, into the everyday conversations and reflections of young Muslims in Britain. It has also spread from peer-to-peer exchanges to intergenerational conversations, which are crucially important in the formation of relationships. In other words, some young

Muslims are not only talking to their friends and perhaps their siblings about dating, but they are also bringing up the subject with their parents. This leads to some young people finding receptive audiences, both because they are addressing a problem that their parents have already recognised, and because they are doing so in terms that respect the religious principles to which the wider family subscribe.

Moreover, there are parents who are conscious that the matchmaking customs that worked for them are no longer so effective (Ahmad, 2012; Ouis, 2007). Janan explained that ‘the *rishta* [in this context, courtship or matchmaking] process is becoming too like inefficient in terms of meeting someone’ (Janan Female 29 Glasgow). She went on to suggest that parents can be open to modifying traditional processes. This reduces restrictions, increases choices, and may lead to marriages with a better chance of lasting, while it can also relieve the parents of some of the onerous responsibility of making a match. One thing it can also circumvent is the often excruciating and ineffectual meetings in which a potential suitor visits. Modifications to the *rishta* process are designed to avoid the awkwardness (or worse) summarised by Zarah as ‘having to meet each other once over tea and biscuits and then having to get married the next week’ (Zarah Female 23 Yorkshire).

Another important reason why halal dating can be well received within some families is that, as indicated when we discussed familial receptivity, it respects rather than transgresses religious principles, which are presented as taking precedence over cultural traditions, customs and heritage. The assertion of halal dating finds parallels in this respect with other ways in which young Muslims – women in particular – have empowered themselves through increased religiosity (Mondal, 2008; Yip, 2010). By trumping culture with religion, they make choices that family members find difficult to oppose. Bilal observed this general trend in his own circle: ‘As certain people get more religious, other people have to

come up with their own arguments to say that what we're doing is right as well, there's nothing wrong with it' (Bilal Male 22 Yorkshire). Meanwhile Safa explained the significance of these developments for dating: 'because the youngsters are more religious or have become more religiously aware', they are receptive to the idea of halal dating, which is 'like a concept that they like to use when they're looking for their spouse' (Safa Female 22 Yorkshire). Safa gestured towards the idea that increased religiosity is not simply or necessarily a way of carving out agency.

Limitations of Halal Dating

Despite its promise, halal dating is not an easy or universal solution for all the challenges that young Muslims face as they contemplate and make choices regarding sexual relationships. While some find the idea empowering, not all are convinced, and some feel it does not apply to them. Many young Muslims continue to feel that all dating is haram. They are not convinced that dating can be reconciled with their religious principles. Yusuf was another respondent who argued that halal dating is a smokescreen:

I mean halal is typically a word that people tend to slap onto things to give it a stamp of approval [...] but the word seems to be or could seem to be contradictory in itself, so halal would be permissible but then dating isn't permissible. So how can you make something permissible that is impermissible? It creates this interesting conflict almost between the two. (Yusuf Male 22 Gay Yorkshire)

Yusuf's scepticism about this term may have been compounded by his position as a gay man. As such, it may stem from him having seen others enjoying new freedoms which are not available to him, a point we pick up below. Others echoed the view that halal dating is an oxymoron. Zarah said, 'I do think it's a contradictory term, to combine the words "halal" and

“dating” together’ (Zarah Female 23 Yorkshire). Others similarly spoke of contradiction and conflict, expressing unease with the idea of halal dating. Safa posed the rhetorical question, ‘How halal can dating actually be?’. Not very, she explained: ‘Because culturally people don’t think of dating as a good thing or if like, we said our parents “Oh, we’re going on a halal date”, they might have a problem with it even now, whether you’ve got [the word] halal in front of dating or not’ (Safa Female 22 Yorkshire). Safa expresses a lingering sense of unease with the idea of halal dating:

I feel like you are kind of getting into dodgy waters when you are going into the dating side of things. I think it could be okay because you have got someone with you and you are not holding hands or anything like that. But you could also be getting into dangerous territory. (Safa Female 22 Yorkshire)

Some of those who have attempted halal dating also admit to feeling divided about it, feeling unsure whether it is religiously fitting or whether they are doing it with the right motives. Iman said that she does date but is not sure it is justifiable to do so: ‘Ideally speaking, if I could stick by my values and principles, I probably wouldn’t go near dating at all and just try and just sort of try to do things Islamically’ (Iman Female 27 Glasgow). While some young Muslims are persuaded by the possibility of halal dating, it is thus important to remember that others are not, and that they wish to register their agency in other ways, and in other choices.

Others find halal dating too restrictive. Since this form of dating is widely assumed to lead to marriage, many non-heterosexual Muslims feel excluded by it. Yusuf told us: ‘I don’t think the term will ever be relevant to me, due to my sexuality. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to halal date’ (Yusuf Male 22 Gay Yorkshire). While halal dating is providing some young Muslims with the language through which to speak to their parents about the relationship choices they are making, those who are gay or lesbian face additional and, for many,

insurmountable complications. They feel they cannot speak about dating of any kind because it would involve breaking the silence about their sexuality. Saamiya said she 'wouldn't tell' her parents 'because even without me even asking them, I immediately know what their reaction would be'. She added that her brothers know she is 'a lesbian but my parents, I don't think they would ever understand if I ever do come out to them' (Saamiya Female 18 Lesbian Glasgow).

Even for those who do feel persuaded by the legitimacy of halal dating, this idea does not provide all the answers. The fundamentals of halal dating, upon which most agree, prove easier said than done. Chaperoned meetings may sometimes be difficult to arrange, as Hassan explains:

From an Islamic point of view, you shouldn't even see a girl without a chaperone. So like from the outset it [an unchaperoned meeting] was wrong, do you know what I mean? So everything we kind of did together, we did alone and it so it was wrong. It was difficult to conform. (Hassan Male 29 Yorkshire)

Even when a chaperone can be procured, dates may feel awkward. Hassan reflected that 'It is really hard to [...] build a personal relationship with someone or get to know someone when there is someone else there' (Hassan Male 29 Yorkshire). Elaborating on this idea, Zarah averred that the presence of the chaperone 'causes barriers in terms of what you can ask because obviously the potential spouses are going to deem certain questions inappropriate or they're gonna feel embarrassed to say it in front of the third party' (Zarah Female 23 Yorkshire).

Some of the young people we spoke to – particularly the men – also acknowledged the difficulty of adhering to the religious ideal of dating without physical intimacy. Hassan was

open about this recognising that there are times when ideals and realities often diverge and sometimes conflict:

It is so difficult to explain because a part of me is saying that in an ideal world this is what you do, but in a realistic world that is not what happens. So in an ideal world like you would go out [...] but there wouldn't be any like touching, kissing, anything sexual in an ideal world. But again, that doesn't happen. (Hassan Male 29 Yorkshire)

Though some young Muslims judge the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of halal dating to be a shortcoming, this discrepancy may also be seen as generative. Here, in the everyday articulations of halal dating, young people are translating received ideas into their lived experiences. They are borrowing concepts and then, crucially, taking ownership of them.

Salim is not convinced, however, that they are getting this right:

I do feel like sometimes, like my generation of people [...] they aren't very like clued-up in like the halal way to go about these things. So like they'll not know like to have a third person there or like to do it in a group setting or like not so much date but they actually go on dates. (Salim Male 24 Tyne & Wear)

Salim speaks of young people misunderstanding and falling short of the ideals of halal dating. However, we might think of the same people tailoring those ideals in context-specific ways to fit their needs and to affirm the contingency and relational nature of their own cultural and religious convictions and priorities.

Implications and Conclusions

Engagement with ideas about halal dating is opening up spaces of agency for young British Muslims. These young people are negotiating cultural and religious rules against dating, and being open about dating, by breaking silences on the subject and advancing the idea that

dating can, in certain circumstances, be halal. They are finding ways to make choices, mediating between on the one hand widespread family expectations (that they will marry) (Dwyer, 2000; Ahmad, 2012), cultural heritage and religious convictions, and ideas about sex and relationships that are more associated closely with Western and British culture (that they will date), on the other. It might be too strong to say that are finding ways to 'have it all' (Hussain, Johnson and Alam, 2017). More precisely, they are searching for ways of 'being modern *and* modest' (Franceschelli and O'Brien, 2015: 696; emphasis added).

The ideas about halal dating explored in this paper are largely derivative, borrowed from content that young people are accessing online and in print, in novels, short stories and poetry. But, in the process of discussing and distilling this content, young people are taking ownership of the notion of halal dating, making it their own, and coming to conclusions about the frontier between haram and halal in the context of personal relationships. Typically, in so doing, they embrace the wider definition of halal dating as dating in which a chaperone is present; in which physical intimacy is avoided; and in which the intention to marry is present. That said, different individuals approach these criteria differently as they practise and parley what halal dating means to them. Some insist that marriage be discussed from the outset, for instance; whereas others are prepared to leave this implicit. Some speak of avoiding physical contact, while others categorically rule it out. Some are prepared to meet in person, whereas others date over the phone or internet. As they interpret halal dating for themselves, then, these individuals creatively and affirmatively define its meanings.

The findings presented in this article are gendered in important ways, reflecting the different pressures that are imposed upon women and men. Within our interviews, it was mostly the women who explored the pressure not to date, nor to be seen dating, nor to talk about dating. This analysis is unsurprising, given what is already known about relationship

practices within Asian-heritage families (Ahmed, 2001, 2012; Ouis, 2007). Male interviewees, by contrast, were more likely to refer to the unwritten rule that they should not be seen to date. This means that, while both sexes have a stake in dating, more is at risk for women. There was also a difference between the ways in which women and men spoke about the ideals and realities of halal dating. Perhaps because they were conforming to respective gender stereotypes, it was usually the men who debated the temptations of physical intimacy and their limited powers to resist these once out on a date.

Despite its promise, halal dating is not a panacea. Young Muslims do not see it as a straightforward or universally applicable solution for all the challenges they face in their personal relationships. Some young British Muslims feel that the traditional expectations around introductions and arranged marriages can and do work for them. Some feel that dating is always haram. Others feel the term is too restrictive to apply to them. Since halal dating is widely assumed to lead to marriage, many non-heterosexual Muslims feel that the term will never apply to them, despite the possibility of same-sex marriage in Britain today. The idea of halal dating is for some, but not all young Muslims.

These findings point towards broader conclusions about the differentiated forms that agency and choice may take within diverse societies, forms that mainstream observers have not always recognised. The delicate and diplomatic expressions of agency on the part of young people seeking more personal freedom, while maintaining good relations within their families and communities, demonstrate agency among people who are wrongly presumed to have little or no agency. The choices they make are significant to the individuals concerned – including young women and gay men – but they also matter deeply to the wider societies in which they live. Minorities including Muslims in Western societies are often accused of passivity, tantamount to a rejection or failure to live up to Western-identified liberal values

(Massad, 2015; Okin, 1999). What we have shown, instead, is that they are not passive; they express agency, but not always in ways that are recognisable to liberal observers because they are not as individualistic, nor as openly resistant. That said, these young Muslims do not simply replicate forms of agency observed in predominantly Islamic societies and countries. As in other areas of their lives, they mix and match. For example, though they espouse a more collective approach to sexual relationships than other British people tend to do, these young British Muslims do also express their personal preferences and desires, and some are prepared to resist pressures and norms, strategically and selectively. If, as Mahmood (2001, p.223) puts it, agency is 'constituted in different cultural and political locations,' then the agency of these young British Muslims reflects the complex –diversity and hybrid – conditions in which they are living their lives. To recognise the different ways in which agency is expressed is both to undermine divisive claims such as these – about the difference of minorities – and it is also to reach towards a more differentiated and inclusive understanding of agency itself.

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¹ The prefix 'Ustad' signifies that someone is a teacher, either of spiritual or secular education.

² 'Mufti' signifies a Muslim who has expertise in religious knowledge and matters.

³ Muzmatch is a Muslim dating app. Founded by Shahzad Younas in 2011, it seeks to encourage halal dating leading to marriage rather than the 'hook-ups' that often ensue from mainstream dating apps.