

HALAL DATING: CHANGING ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES AMONG YOUNG BRITISH MUSLIMS

Abstract

Young Muslims in the UK are finding and making space for agency to gain greater control over their personal lives through new ways of thinking and talking about personal and sexual relationships. One way they are doing this is to use the diction of ‘halal’ and ‘haram’ when reflecting on and negotiating personal relationships. The idea of halal dating has gained currency in social media and literary fiction in recent years. This paper explores the concept’s significance within the lived lives and sexual relationships of young British Muslims. It draws upon 56 in-depth interviews which we conducted with young (aged 16-30) British Muslims of Pakistani heritage. The interviews examine experiences, attitudes and thoughts about dating. We found that many of these young British Muslims do date or have dated, or they do at least talk about or contemplate dating, and that they reflect seriously on this subject rather than dismissing it as haram. By entertaining the idea that certain forms of dating may be halal – these forms include chaperoned meetings, avoiding physical contact, and dating only where there is an intention to marry – some young Muslims are finding and claiming agency. In this way, they are increasingly able to make and justify relationship choices of their own.

Key words: Muslim, dating, halal, haram, agency, sexual relationships

Introduction

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, whilst remaining within the boundaries of their faith and identity.

To explore halal dating in everyday life, we interviewed a number of young British Muslim men and women. We found that many of these young Muslims and their friends do reflect seriously on the topic of dating rather than dismissing it and that, for them, certain forms of dating are 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 taboo or, at very least, embarrassing and awkward.

The significance of this paper and part of our motivation for exploring young British Muslim relationship practices is indicated in a report by the Muslim Youth Helpline (Malik, Shaikh and Suleyman 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. (Malik, Shaikh and Suleyman 2010: 2)

A layered analysis of what some Muslims refer to as halal dating will likely contribute to this wider project of supporting and understanding young Muslim men and women.

By recognising the agency which some young Muslims are expressing in their sexual relationships, it may also be possible to challenge erroneous and unflattering beliefs about Muslims, which are widespread in mainstream British society (Smith-Hefner 2005). In particular, this article challenges the belief that young Muslims in Western countries have little control over their relationships, and that they are not able to make their own choices about potential partners by dating them (Chambers, Phillips, Ali, Hopkins and Pande 2018).

A growing body of empirical research is challenging stereotypes about Muslims as a group of people whose relationships are loveless. The received idea about Muslim relationships is that they primarily express the power of family, tradition and religion rather than the desires and feelings of those who are most directly involved. The growing research field is producing increasingly nuanced pictures of sexualities and sexual relationship practices among young Muslims in Western settings (Lo and Aziz 2009). Thinkers have investigated the ever more diverse ways in which Muslims meet their future spouses. Journalism on speed dating, matrimonial services and online introductions has been published in such broadsheet newspapers as the *Guardian* (Aziz 2011) and the *New York Times* (Ellick 2011). There has also been an upsurge in sophisticated research papers on arranged marriages (Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002), which distinguishes more clearly than was previously the case between arranged and forced marriages (Phillips 2011). Other researchers offer fine-grained readings of the fulfilment and agency that many find in arranged marriages (Pande 2014). Such work explores the changing dynamics of marriage, examining the effects of increasing levels of education and career advancement among Muslim women (Ahmed 2001, 2012; Phillips 2007). Higher

expectations of married life, coupled with the failure of some arranged marriages, have led many women to articulate a desire to find their own marriage partners (Oui 2007; Qureshi, Charsley and Shaw 2014). Meanwhile, some have opted for same-sex relationships (Yip 2004) and others, particularly men, have admitted to having pre-marital or extra-marital sex, often with partners outside their communities (Griffiths 2015).

And yet, despite the diversity, growth and strength of this body of empirical work on Muslims, sexualities and relationships, stereotypes about Muslims have not gone away, suggesting the need for detailed empirical research on this subject, as well as for better communication and dissemination of findings. This empirical work should not only be concerned with challenging stereotypes about Muslims, but it should also attend to their everyday relationship experiences, building upon important work in this field by researchers such as Andrew Yip (e.g. 2004), Pnina Werbner (2007) and Nilüfer Göle (2017). It should also investigate young Muslims' ideas about the things they can and cannot do, including the ways in which they do or do not date.

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 of what Allah (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 judgement.

By speaking about halal (and haram) dating, young Muslims are applying terms that have more commonly been associated with food, eating (see Hussaini 1993; Eliasi and Dwyer 2002) and clothes (Johnson 2017). Researchers have acknowledged the application of these terms 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 (Wilson 1997; Mohsin Butt and Aftab 2013). Added to this, these terms have been frequently used in imaginative literature (Malik 2015; Janmohamed 2016). There has, however, been less attention to halal and haram relationship practices in academic literature, notwithstanding some recent and welcome contributions that provide the foundations and points 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':

The 'strict Muslims' who date halal (Islamically permissible). The second group I call 'Eid Muslims' because many are not strict in practice and attend mosques only on holidays. While technically they are dating haram (unlawfully), without chaperones, they are keeping physical intimacy to a minimum and parental involvement at a maximum. The third group *Sex and the City*-style (definitely haram), openly and freely leading a non-Islamic lifestyle, having premarital sex, sometimes in a series of monogamous relationships. The last group consists of mostly Muslim men who date non-Muslim women. These non-Muslim women sometimes convert to Islam and marry

their boyfriends. But some are unceremoniously dumped when a halal marriage is arranged by the man's parents. (Hasan 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 Ustad Yasmin Mogahed, Nouman Ali Khan and Mufti Ismail Menk are speaking to young Muslims with a candour and directness around relationship issues, which many young Muslims find refreshing and entertaining.¹ Examples of this include Mufti Menk and Ali Dawah discussing the etiquette of premarital relationships in their YouTube video entitled 'Halal Dating' and blogger Neha Rashid addressing similar themes in her online posting about halal dating in the United States (Rashid 2011).

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 fiction such as Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and Noor Al Hidayah's (2017) self-published *Muslim Dating Disasters*, an example of what Lucinda Newns (2017) 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, and may be light-hearted and playful, but are 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 point of departure, we aim to examine the concept and practice of halal dating in the everyday 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, as well as running focus groups and related workshops on personal relationships. We worked in 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, amounting to 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 (**Table 1**). Doing so, we sought and achieved approximate balance between the three regions and between young people of different genders, sexualities, ages (within the 16-30 age range) and relationship statuses. Ultimately, 23 interviews took place in Yorkshire, 17 in Glasgow and 16 in Tyne & Wear. Participants were recruited by the members of the team through personal

networks, snowball sampling, leaflet distribution and via organisations which referred or introduced individuals to the researchers. Interviews were conducted by the postdoctoral researcher [ANONYMISED FOR PEER REVIEW], by some of the other team members, and by community interviewers, who had been trained locally by the research team. These interviews took place over a 12-month period beginning in May 2016. In these wide-ranging interviews, which lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, we asked participants about their relationship attitudes and practices. They were recorded and later transcribed. 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. Those who were happy to proceed signed a consent form. To preserve anonymity, we refer to all participants using pseudonyms. Any names they mentioned have also been changed. **Table 1** provides a summary of those, drawn from the larger sample of 56, whose transcripts are quoted in this paper.

Reporting the findings of these interviews, we will show that many young British Muslims are confronting cultural and religious rules against dating, and against openness about dating, by breaking silences on the subject and advancing the idea that dating can, in certain circumstances, be halal. Through their confrontations and negotiations, they are opening up spaces of agency, finding ways to make choices, mediating between widespread family expectations (that they will marry) (Dwyer 2000; Ahmad 2012), cultural heritage and religious convictions, on the one hand, and ideas about sex and relationships that are more associated closely with Western and British culture (that they will date), on the other. To put this another way, if perhaps exaggeratedly, they are finding ways in which they can 'have it all' (Hussain, Johnson and Alam 2017). Or, more accurately, they are searching for ways of 'being modern *and* modest' (Franceschelli and O'Brien 2015: 696; emphasis added). Before illuminating the

ways in which they are breaking silences by finding particular ways to talk about halal dating, it is necessary to identify these silences and their implications.

Silence and Secrecy

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 profile of Zarah and other interviewees mentioned throughout this paper). Other interviewees alluded to common knowledge which is allegedly 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/South Asian heritage families and communities are left more room for freedom than women to explore pre-marital sexual possibilities, even though neither are overtly encouraged into pre-marital relationships, and the different rules for men and women are well documented (see, for example, Ouis 2009). 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)

Many of the young Muslims we spoke to said they and their friends and peers conform to the expectation that they do not date, or that if they do so, they do so discreetly. Adeena referred to a young couple she knows 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 generalised that some of her friends do date, and that they do so secretly. As she put it, '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 may work in some respects. 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 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 as follows: ‘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 constrained her. She reflected that the consequences of 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 this silence. They envisaged possible scenarios and conversations, particularly with their parents:

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 broach the hitherto taboo subject of pre- or extra-marital 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.

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 must therefore come to some of their own conclusions about what is religiously permissible. 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, and she spoke simply of ‘avoiding’ physical intimacy, exercising restraint, rather than absolutely forbidding such contact. As she put it, ‘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 cynical 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, and call it halal dating’ (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 avoid the temptations of physical intimacy by avoiding face-to-face meetings. For example:

We met through an app called Muzmatch. 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 concerned 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 apparent, 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 2009). 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 receptive to modifying traditional processes. Their receptivity may allow their children more freedom and establish 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 ineffective meetings in which a potential suitor visits. Modifications to the *rishta* process work to avoid the awkwardness (or worse) described by Zarah of ‘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 is well received within some families is that, as indicated earlier, 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 have found agency within increased religiosity (Lewis 2007; Mondal, 2008). By trumping culture with religion, young people are able to make choices and carve out spaces of agency, doing this in ways that family members find it difficult to oppose. Bilal had 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. It can be the other way round, in the sense that some young people are becoming more religious and are then reflecting on the implications of that for their lives. In some cases, this may lead them to do what they feel is religiously permissible or correct; in others, it may open up opportunities and new choices.

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 voiced the perspective 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, he could have 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 right or whether they are doing it with the right motives. Iman said that she does date but is not sure it is right or 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). As such, while some young Muslims are persuaded by the possibility of halal dating, it is 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 [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:

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)

As John Berger (1977) observes, ideals and realities often diverge and sometimes conflict.

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)

Rather than speaking, as Salim does, of young people misunderstanding and falling short of the ideals of halal dating, we might think of the same people picking, choosing and tailoring those ideas to fit their needs and to express 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. Largely through the conversations with peers, with themselves, and ultimately with their families, which the idea of halal dating makes possible, these young people are finding ways to make and justify their own relationship choices. The ideas about halal dating explored in this paper are largely derivative, borrowed as they are from content that young people are accessing online and in print, in novels, short stories and poetry. Discussing and distilling this content, young people are taking ownership of the notion of halal dating, making it their own, and coming to their own conclusions about the frontier between haram and halal in the context of personal relationships. As mentioned earlier, young Muslims typically 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 assertively 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). 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 stake 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. In sum, then, the idea of halal dating is for some, but not all young Muslims.

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Table 1: Young British Muslims quoted in this paper.

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Sexuality	Relationship status	Age	Location
Zarah	Female	Heterosexual	Single	23	Yorkshire
Hawa	Female	Heterosexual	Married	25	Yorkshire
Safa	Female	Heterosexual	Married	22	Yorkshire
Salim	Male	Heterosexual	Single	24	Tyne & Wear
Adeena	Female	Heterosexual	In a relationship	19	Yorkshire
Ayisha	Female	Heterosexual	Single	27	Yorkshire
Hassan	Male	Heterosexual	Single	29	Yorkshire
Shahid	Male	Heterosexual	Engaged	24	Yorkshire
Yusuf	Male	Gay	Single	22	Yorkshire
Amina	Female	Heterosexual	Single	19	Yorkshire
Annum	Female	Heterosexual	Not stated	26	Yorkshire
Iman	Female	Heterosexual	Married	27	Glasgow
Aliya	Female	Heterosexual	Married to a revert Muslim	24	Tyne & Wear
Maryam	Female	Heterosexual	Single	23	Yorkshire
Janan	Female	Heterosexual	Married	29	Glasgow
Bilal	Male	Heterosexual	In a relationship	22	Yorkshire
Noor	Female	Heterosexual	Married	27	Yorkshire
Saamiya	Female	Lesbian	Single	18	Glasgow

¹ The prefix Ustad signifies teacher. Mufti signifies preacher.