Beyond the Traditional-Modern Binary: Faith and Identity in Muslim Women's Online Matchmaking Profiles

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Abstract:

Finding a suitable partner in both diasporic and non-diasporic settings proves increasingly challenging for young Muslims, especially those unable or not wanting to search within their kinship networks. At the same time, religious matchmaking websites are becoming increasingly common especially among Muslim women. As studies of Muslim matchmaking sites tend to focus on the ever-popular topic of the headscarf and its associations in the matchmaking context, a much more comprehensive study of the specificity of the online religious identities and self-representation is required. This paper examines a number of profiles of young Muslim women using online matchmaking sites and discusses broad themes of faith, ethnicity and identity that emerge in the analysis.

Introduction

Questions about the role of online matchmaking in the lives of Muslims are, inevitably, posed in the context of the often disputed binary: traditional/arranged and non-traditional/own choice of marriage partner. Researchers note that gender ideals, gender relations and roles are evolving in postcolonial diasporic settings (Dwyer 2000). Traditional and non-traditional perspectives on marriage and sexuality are competing and both depend on age, class, education and faith positioning (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997). Literature on Muslim online matchmaking is very fragmentary, possibly because online matchmaking, whether in secular or religious contexts, is largely a product of the last decade. Most studies of online matchmaking in specific national or cultural contexts recognize the

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increasing significance of this phenomenon in the process of selecting a suitable marriage partner. However, they tend to differ in the evaluation of matchmaking opportunities that technology offers.

While not focusing on just Muslims but the Nigerian context in general[1] Adesina and Ayodele (2004:104,110) discuss online matchmaking in terms of the challenge it poses to the 'contemporary Nigerian family'. They refer to it as 'an area of concern', along with online gambling, pornography, paedophilia and other forms of 'cyber-carnality.' However, in their conclusions they introduce a more positive perspective on online matchmaking, as they suggest that it has the capacity to strengthen the national Nigerian unity through inter-tribal and inter-religious marriages. The way in which Adesina and Ayodele contrast traditional matchmaking organized by families and online matchmaking indicates that the concepts of individualism, 'detachment from family ties' and abandonment of religious values go hand in hand with the use of technology.

These conclusions are questioned by other studies (admittedly conducted in different locations). For example, Bunt (2009:104) argues that online matchmaking is a practice that indicates flexibility and practicality strongly overarched by religious and cultural norms. In fact, matchmaking executed online may reinforce traditional practices, as it may still be carried out by family members who participate in decision-making regarding selecting candidates out of the entire pool of service users. Bunt writes:

> Inherent cultural-religious concepts associated with male-female relationships – including *purdah*, engagement, and betrothal – are challenged, adjusted and compensated by technology. They retain an implicit, familiar, deep-rooted Islamic core.

Bunt further notes that, in principle, Islamic authorities are not against online matchmaking, as long as *halal* (permissible) practices are observed and the purpose of the interaction is marriage[2]. This is significant as it demonstrates that a marriage may be both Islamic and non-traditional (not

arranged by family members) at the same time. In one of the success stories published by MuslimMatch.com and cited by Bunt, two young people from different cultures and countries 'spot each other', establish that they are suitable for each other and make marriage vows. As the groom writes, 'she [the bride] has already informed her parents about her decision. They have no objections. The same applies to me' (Bunt, 2009:106).

It is possible that the indication of such websites' purpose and permissibility lies in the terminology they use. While many of them define themselves as 'marriage oriented' and use the term *matchmaking* (mediating between two parties in order to bring about a marriage between them), there are also sites used by Muslims that exist for the purpose of *online dating*; this denotes online meetings with potential romantic partners which may or may not result in marriage (Galal 2003).

In my PhD research (Piela 2009) I addressed online matchmaking as one of the issues related to partner choice in the lives of Muslim women. Participants in my study highlighted two reasons why online matchmaking may be a useful option: firstly, there are Muslims existing without a Muslim family network, in particular converts, as also pointed out by Lo and Aziz (2009), and other Muslims without families, for example orphans, in the diaspora. They may find it much harder to find a Muslim spouse without kinship support. Secondly, contrary to the pervasive stereotype of tightly-knit Muslim families and networks that almost always influence individual decisions, there are many cases where the parents are not interested in investing effort into arranging their children's marriages. One participant in the study described her family as 'dysfunctional' specifically because her parents refused to suggest suitable spouses, and she was glad to have had the opportunity to seek out a husband on the Internet and relieved that she did not have to go through personal dating to get to know him.

The consequences of remaining unmarried are harsher for women in Muslim communities. Single women may be ridiculed as unattractive but at the same time perceived as a potential threat to the honor of the family (Imtoual and Hussein 2009:28). Imtoual and Hussein note that difficulties

in finding a suitable husband result for many unmarried, divorced and widowed Muslim women in having to cope with unfulfilled sexual desires as their adulthood is defined by celibacy, a state regarded in Islam with unease as marriage is expected of faithful Muslims (Lo and Aziz 2009).

Online matchmaking is considered a convenient solution to this problem by many women who comfortably create their new online identities in order to attract a Muslim husband. Zwick and Chelariu (2006:381) write: 'the new medium requires a whole new language with which to construct a desirable and marketable digital persona'. Unsurprisingly, according to research that investigated which traits were most desirable in future spouses among U.S. Muslims, religiosity was listed at the top (Badahdah and Tiemann, 2005). Significantly, 'a greater percentage of women than men listed religiosity as a characteristic they sought in a mate and they were more likely to describe themselves as religious than were the men' (Badahdah and Tiemann, 2009:84). In their discussion, Badahdah and Tiemann conclude that religiosity is highly desirable for Muslims of both genders because religiosity in a mate is required by the Qur'an, but they do not explain the finding related to women's stronger emphasis on religiosity both in themselves and their potential partners.

Lo and Aziz list three types of Muslim matchmaking services that can be found online: local ones, based around mosques in relatively small communities, where imams fulfill the function of the matchmaker by keeping lists of those looking for spouses and literally matching them together; organization-based ones, where national Islamic organizations like ISNA have sections of their websites devoted to matchmaking. They use demographic information as the main indicator of compatibility. Finally, there are commercially-driven websites that are Muslim versions of general dating websites where one has to purchase membership to exchange messages with other members but which give an opportunity to build an extensive personal profile with pictures. As opposed to the first two types where the matchmaking involves entire kinship networks (i.e. it is the parents who put up the matrimonial ads), the third type attracts singles looking for spouses independently. Lo and Aziz (2009:17) conclude the comparison by saying:

> It gives users, especially women, who make up the overwhelming percentage of participants, the ability and opportunity to express their personal issues, concerns, ambitions and feelings. Expressing this range of choices is not often available or allowed in the traditional intermediary system, or in those *pro bono* Islamic sites that harbour traditional Muslim dating values.

Zwick and Chelariu (2006:381) argue similarly:

> By encouraging an individualistic pursuit of wants and needs, competition, and commodification of the self, the online matchmaking site [of type 3] promotes efficient and effective spouse searching rather than adherence to cultural conventions.

As this paper aims to explore the diversity of Muslim women's online self-expression, including their perspectives on marriage and religion, it concentrates on personal profiles populating commercially-driven websites, type 3 of the matchmaking services described above.

Data and method

The matchmaking websites

There is a multitude of commercially-driven Muslim matchmaking websites. I was able to identify two that fulfilled all the necessary criteria (independently posted ads, a sophisticated search engine, and the platform adapted to needs of Muslims in terms of design) and allowed me to read the profiles (which were open-access) without an account. Whilst many Muslim matchmaking websites allow believers of any religion to join (despite the fact that Muslim women are expected to marry only Muslim men and Muslim men are limited to the believers amongst the 'People of the Book', a group comprising Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but excluding Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and other religions), I have selected two websites that mainly targeted Muslims.

Website A[3] markets itself as a 'serious Muslim marriage website' for 'serious people'. It is global in scope in that it allows selection of any country of origin and 'any country' is a default search category. The sign-up process is straightforward; the only religion-related question presents 7 possible answers: 'Just a Muslim', 'Muslim - Hanbali', 'Muslim - Hanafi', 'Muslim - Shafi', 'Muslim - Maliki', 'Muslim - Shia', and 'Other'. The emphasis is clearly on different Sunni *madhabs* (sects) of Islam, while divisions in Shiism are unacknowledged and other religions are combined together in one category. Other Muslim groups, such as the Salafi, Sufi, or unorthodox versions of Islam are not mentioned as an option at all. The only options related to the marital state are 'Never married', 'Divorced', or 'Widowed', precluding already married men looking for a second, third, or a fourth wife from signalling this fact.

On Website B the signup process is more complex and more information is required. The 'Religion' section contains seven questions: 'Religiousness' ('very religious', 'religious', 'somewhat religious', 'not religious', 'prefer not to say'); 'Hijab' ('yes', 'no', 'prefer not to say'); 'Beard' ('yes', 'no', 'prefer not to say'); 'Are you a revert[4] to Islam?' ('yes', 'no'); 'How strict are you about Halal?' ('I always keep halal', 'I usually keep halal', 'I keep halal at home only', 'I do not keep halal'); How often do you perform Salaah[5]? ('Always', 'Usually', 'Sometimes', 'Never'). This degree of detail allows others to narrow their searches to candidates whose views on religion they can accept. One can set the search only to candidates who are very religious, wear a hijab or a beard, always keep halal, and always perform the prayer (or otherwise), thus streamlining the search for a spouse. Website B offers a wider choice of answers on the marital state – in addition to the three given by Website A, it lists 'Legally separated' and 'Anulled' - but it does not include 'Married' either. Finally, Website B automatically transfers its visitors to national branches (detecting IP numbers of users' computers); thus the profiles I browsed and selected for the purpose of this paper were mostly based in the U.K.

Both websites include questions on ethnicity or country of origin, citizenship, and living arrangements, as well as level of education, occupation and

other 'standard' questions included by matchmaking/dating websites (age, personal qualities, desired qualities in the spouse, etc.) Both websites also set the minimum age of members as 18 – the legal marriage age in most Western countries.

Profiles

A random sample of 33 women's profiles has been selected from the two websites described above. The only criteria for selection were the presence of a photo and a developed profile. Statistical data on the participants is as follows: 36% are divorced while 63% never married; 84% (27) are based in the UK, 3% (1) in Singapore, 6% (2) in Indonesia, 3% (1) in the Seychelles, and 6% (2) in the USA. Mean age in the sample is 32; 9% (3) of participants are in the age group 18-24: 67% (11) in the age group 25-34:, 27% (9) are in the age group 35-45. The youngest participant is 21 and the oldest is 48.

Many participants indicate educational achievements: 6% (2) list their highest degree as Masters; 58% (19) have a Bachelor's degree; a further 15% (5) list a non-degree professional qualification. Some 15% (5) have completed high school, while 6% (2) did not reveal their educational status but indicated they worked in managerial jobs. In terms of the level of Islamic faith 12% (4) indicated they were 'very religious', 24% (8) defined themselves as 'religious', 54% (18) 'somewhat religious', 6% (2), 'not very religious' and 3% (1) did not specify a level of faith.

The analysis process

The analysis of the data, obtained through virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), was facilitated by the use of Atlas ti, a computer package designed to aid in data coding and organisation. Computer-assisted analysis in qualitative research differs considerably form quantitative analysis in that the computer does not calculate, but helps manipulate and present relevant fragments of data. I decided to use Atlas ti for a number of reasons: firstly, it allows the handling of much more data than the process of manual analysis; secondly, it enables the researcher to assign codes to fragments

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of text which can be later retrieved according to the code, thus giving a great deal of control and acceleration to the process of retrieving relevant segments; thirdly, it allows quick access to the context of a quote which is relevant in the analysis process since codes and quotes can be linked and displayed visually to facilitate systematic comparison of data; and finally, it helps to assess the counterevidence for alternative interpretations of data (Joffe and Yardley 2004:64).

All quotes from participants' profiles are in their original form, and I have maintained all typographical errors and emphases, with a few exceptions where I specifically mentioned that emphasis was mine. Preserving the original form of the data, with its typographical errors, was a conscious decision, as I agree with Markham (2004:153) that rewriting participants' contributions may be ethically problematic.

Emerging themes

Religion

The extent to which religion plays a leading role in construction of profiles differs in the cases, as do the ways in which the concept of religion is employed to construct one's profile. Participants referred to religion in describing their own qualities, convictions and interests, as well as in defining their expectations of a perfect husband and marriage. Religion comes across as a very dynamic process and participants often mention that developing knowledge of Islam is one of the key activities they would like to share with their future husbands. Sometimes marriage to a knowledgeable Muslim is perceived as an act that would literally bring them back on the path of Islam:

> (...) and most important - [I want] someone with in touch with their deen as I hope the process of marriage betters me as a muslim. Inshallah. (Fazila H, UK)
> I am learning more about my deen and try to pray 5 times a day. When Mr Right comes along will like to share my knowledge and learn more from eachother. (Asma, UK)

This perception of marriage as a religious act, in conjunction with the religious self-assessment of 54% of the participants as 'somewhat religious' further suggests an intention of many participants to raise their level of faith and commitment to Islam. Marriage is also understood as an act of *completion* of one's faith, a crowning of one's Islamic path, and some women refer to a hadith that reports Prophet Muhammad's praise of marriage as 'half of the faith' (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001:932)

> My religion is important to me and I thank Allah for helping me through each test. Now I feel its time for me to complete my deen and share my life with someone special. (Sania, UK)

There is no embarrassment or awkwardness due to the independent online searching for a husband, noted by Hanvey (2010) as a common characteristic of individuals participating in online dating. On the contrary, the participants claim that they are responsible for selecting a candidate that would be most appropriate for them. One of them quoted the Qur'an to justify her actions:

> Allah will not change the condition of people as long as they do not change their state [themselves]. [Quran: Ar-Ra'd: 11] (Lei10, UK)

Participants rarely define a 'good Muslim', although in a few cases the profiles were built around a detailed description of the religious positioning (strength of faith, practices, knowledge and sect belonging) of the ideal candidate:

> In my own words: I am looking to find a good Muslim brother that is on his deen. Full of taqwa, that has high iman, and can recite qua'ran knowing it with tasfiir. He has to be a passionate Muslim from the heart and follow the sunnah of the profit purely. He needs to pray five times a day, and be a man that will allow his wife to pray in the Musjid. Also I would prefer someone that is an American Revert. (Alia, United States)

The expectation that the husband will not object to Alia praying in the mosque can be better understood in the context of the study by Bagby, Perl and Froehles (2001) who found that women accounted for only 15% of those praying in U.S. mosques, in contrast to men who make up 78%. One of the factors affecting these proportions may be the fact that according to most religious interpretations, only men are required to attend jum'ah prayer (the Friday congregational prayer). However, in some places, like the politically active Detroit Muslim population, mosque attendance amongst women is as high as 37% (Jamal 2005:56). Another religious preference for marrying a revert, expressed in Alia's profile, is frequent amongst other converts and some 'born Muslims' (there is even a specialized matchmaking website at www.marryaconvert.com):

> I am particularly interested in getting to know brothers who have reverted to islam. (MissLovely, Seychelles)

> It would be nice to meet a revert like myself so we can learn Islam together at a steady pace. (StarryEyes, UK)

However, the most frequent requirement amongst women who define themselves as religious is that the man is a "good Muslim", regardless of ethnicity and status:

> I am looking for a muslim, cast, status, job, money....not an issue (Naseema, UK)

> I am in no way a traditional Pakistani and Im not looking for a traditional Pakistani hubby!!! IM a muslim and im lookin 4 a muslim!!! (Sayeeda, UK)

> It does not matter if the brother is a revert or a born Muslim. As long as he is a practising brother of good character & personality. (Sameera, Singapore)

Amongst women who made a reference to polygamy in their profile, none expressed an interest in being a co-wife. Those who do speak about their previous experiences in polygamous relationships have concluded that this type of marriage is not suitable for them. However, the institution of polygamy is not challenged (as it is permitted in some circumstances by the Qur'an), but rather there is the personal preference for being the only wife:

> I do not wish to lie but i am not keen in becoming or going as a co-wife. As a Muslim i am not against Polygamy but as a woman i am uncomfortable with the idea as i really wish to love this person with all my heart till the very end so I would find it difficult to share him. May Allah(swa) forgive my weakness. (Sameera, Singapore)

> I have previously been married twice, both times as a co-wife, both times the situations did not work out due to external factors, allah knows best. although i have no problems with the issue of being a co-wife, i would prefer to marry a single brother 4 the reason of simplicity and inshala the option to take a 2nd/3rd/4th wife is something a husband has the right 2 do if circumstances permit, and allah knows best..(Afsoon, UK)

As in my previous research on women's views on polygamy (Piela 2011), polygamy in this analysis comes across (according to participants) as a type of relationship that a Muslim woman may wish to avoid, for example by stating so in her marriage contract, and still be a 'good Muslim'.

'Culture' and ethnic backgrounds

'Culture', a term used very frequently by the participants, had very negative connotations in the analyzed profiles. It usually denoted customs and traditions of ethnic groups in which Islam is the dominant religion and that have merged with interpretations of Islam espoused by these cultural groups. This is a commonly expressed view in Muslim women's online

debates (Piela 2011), other Islamic 'cyber-environments' (Bunt 2009) and in general discussions amongst Muslims (Ramadan 2009:184) that many Muslims have failed to achieve an understanding of what is Islamic[6] and what is 'cultural', causing many customs to be mistakenly considered as Islamic (Ramadan 2004:139). Consequently, these are blamed for contamination of Islamic practices and beliefs. This 'Islam vs. culture' narrative is a very prevalent interpretative repertoire[7] in Muslim discussions on the nature of Islam, for example among Muslim feminists who argue that patriarchal applications of Islamic sources have been an unfortunate outcome of specific culture-based interpretations (Barlas 2006). Accordingly, the participants strongly express their opposition to mere 'cultural' sentiments contrasting them with teachings of Islam:

> If you are more into your culture & don't know the importance of our Deen, well don't bother emailing me (Aleesha, UK)

> I don't mix culture with religion, and being a Muslim comes straight from my heart. (Alia, United States)

> Im NOT after a mummies boy ribbon wrapped in a chocolate box of culture lacking a backbone for filling. [If you are] hanging onto mama jiis apron strings and culture and have no Islamic values or practice, then seriously guys, please DONT contact me. Im not interested in the said cultural nonsense. (LL70, UK)

The sarcastic reference to 'mama jii's apron strings' made by LL70 suggests her opposition to 'culture' and scorn regarding the strong bond between men and their mothers that holds late into adulthood, a phenomenon present in many patriarchal cultures including India and Pakistan (Michaelson and Goldschmidt 1971). In addition, the participants tend to cut themselves off from what they see as mechanisms and prejudices common in the Asian Muslim community:

> I'd like to marry someone whose family don't play politics like most Asian families do. (Razia, UK)

> No guys whose parents would disown you if you took a white
> wife home (LL70, UK)

The contemporary association of Islam with particular ethnic groups in the common consciousness, as literature evidences, in both traditionally Muslim (Zeleza 2005:5) and non-Muslim majority contexts (Gorak-Sosnowska 2007), and racist prejudice against converts in some communities result in social difficulties the latter face post-conversion. Racial discrimination among Muslims has been discussed by Karim (2008), who explored the factors that contribute to the emergence and enforcement of divisions within the American Muslim community. Karim (2008:142) reported that in predominantly Asian Muslim contexts suspicion towards converts (both white and African-American) resulted in converts overcoming racial divisions socially and creating 'convert communities'.

Empowerment, compatibility and partnership

Expectations regarding the future husband expressed in the profiles are very carefully delineated in the profiles, suggesting that participants have clearly formulated their perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities in an Islamic marriage. Compatibility was an important concept in all profiles, although the ways in which it was defined varied. Positive traits such as gentleness, respectfulness, independence, maturity, intelligence, good manners and education were listed not because women needed a leader or a 'rock'. Rather, they reflected women's own self-perceptions and a conviction that they need a spouse like themselves to make the relationship work. One participant referred to the *hadith* idea of creation of the woman from a man's rib to signal to her potential suitors that she believes in equality in marriage and she expects her future relationship to be built on this principle:

> Women are made from the mans rib,they are not above you,or
> below you,they are right beside you. (Jameelah99, UK)

A hope that the 'ideal man' would be a best friend, a companion, suggests that women expect partnership relations:

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> I am looking for a life partner aged preferably 38-50 but age is just a number if two souls are compatible. Someone who sees me as their equal, their twin flame. A man who will be my best friend. (Razia, UK)

> I am looking for someone easy-going to compliment my nature. That said I do not want to set strict conditions; I realise that there is no sure-fire criteria in determining who is 'the one'. (Sassy, UK)

> Someone older than me, I don't mind a beard, a companion, someone who will bring out the best in me, a positive soul, someone who prays, knowledgeable in Islam to help me too, mature and down to earth, similar in nature to myself. (StarryEyes, UK)

Men are expected to be compatible with women in that they also grow personally and Islamically. Marriage is not seen as a state to passively remain in, but a perfect opportunity to develop together and support and encourage mutual progress. Such a dynamic understanding of a relationship is shared by many women:

> Someone to laugh with, cry with, be amazed at life's miracles with and grow with. (StarryEyes, UK)

Participants are very clear that they subscribe to online matchmaking websites to find a legitimate spouse, a husband, not a boyfriend or a friend. Extramarital relationships are not allowed in Islam; in addition, unmarried women maintaining free sexual contacts face social stigma and a label of impious promiscuity (Imtoual and Hussein 2009:27-8). It is thus especially important that women using the Internet, a non-traditional mode of finding a spouse whereby they are not socially controlled, construct their identity as sexually unavailable unless married. Unlike participants in Galal's study of Egyptian online dating (2003), where some young people went online as an alternative to face-to-face dating that might be impossible due to religious beliefs, here many

profiles include a disclaimer meant to discourage individuals seeking just dating and not intending to marry:

> I am only interested in getting to know brothers insh'Allah who are serious about marriage. (MissLovely, Seychelles)

> On a final note, married or involved men, and players, please don't respond and waste my time, you know I'm far too good for you :o) (Sayeeda, UK)

> I don't want to be bothered with brothers of islam looking for girlfriend or a relationship,, I am here only for marriage Inshaa allah, (Jameela99, UK)

> No guys with issues or hangups that prevent them from marriage (LL70, UK)

They also cut short men's attempts to befriend them through online communicators:

> Once again, i don't need a homie, or a mate or a buddy who is actually bored and is desperate for friends do not waste your time on that you have been WARNED! (Deen789, United States)

The participants are extremely wary of foreign individuals who may want to enter a marriage in order to use their spouse's citizenship status as a springboard to obtaining a visa in the United Kingdom or the United States. The set-up of an arranged or a forced marriage to a husband in the native country of the parents is challenged and reversed; not only do the women not consider relocating to another country; they do not want to be married just for their citizenship either.

> *Please only contact me if you are a British Citizen and you are from London. I'm not interested in helping one out with their Visa applications to stay in this country!* Razia, UK)

> UK/USA citizen only please!! as I dont want to waste my time.
> (Alia, US)

> Btw i am in no situation to provide visa for anyone as i am a
> single mother who is underpaid. So if u are looking to find a
> better life in Singapore by marrying me, then pls drop the idea.
> (Sameera, Singapore)

Women are also keen to point out that they are neither in desperate need for a husband or friends; almost all profiles contain references to socializing, friends, and families. They indicate they already operate within strong networks. They come across as feeling fulfilled and empowered; a husband is sought so that he can complement, not complete them as individual human beings:

> Im quite sharp too so please dont try to pull a fast one on me
> by assuming Im too old, need a younger guy or struggle to even
> find one :-) (LL70, UK)

> I don't see myself with a "divorced complex"! I am content with
> myself and my life as it is. (Sayeeda, UK)

Finally, a frequent disclaimer concerned men's photographs. Participants tended to disapprove of men trying to contact them but without photographs on their profiles. The women argued that since they have provided photographs of themselves, they should have a similar chance of judging potential suitors' looks. They did not wish to be contacted by men who were unfit or short. Whilst physical attractiveness was not regarded as the most important quality, physical attraction was listed as significant by fifteen participants.

Pushing the traditional boundaries of femininity through leisure practices

Traditionally constructed femininity, framed by concepts of obedience, gentleness, caring responsibilities and home-based hobbies is not common

amongst women who independently seek spouses on the Internet. The participants talk at length about their education, occupation, and unusual/acquired interests, creating an image of financially and socially independent women looking for similar spouses. At the same time, they display a great amount of distance to themselves and their achievements, possibly in order not to come across as conceited or dull to potential suitors.

> I used to be a nerd. I now have it in writing and have gone to be a fully fledged -even bigger nerd in a big nerdy job! :D (Zahra, UK)

> I am a 25 year old Informatics manager currently working in the NHS. I have a stable job but then again, is a job in the NHS stable...hehe. I was actually thinking of starting a business any ideas anyone??? (Razia, UK)

> I am an Investment Banker by day and a musician by night... and on the side I also am a charity event organiser which I love doing. (Jasmine, UK)

One participant talked about her interest in fine art as complementing her successful career. The mention of artists' names and trends in art may constitute a specific code, used to ensure that a future spouse will share her acquired tastes, recognise her as an art connoisseur, and thus prove more compatible with her long-term. An emphasis on such rather elite interests, coupled with a disclosure of her prestigious occupation may also serve as indicators of her social class and the preferred social class of her future spouse:

> I'm a City lawyer, working in London. When not in the confines of the office I can be found wandering around art galleries trying to appreciate surrealist Dali but finding myself drifting back to my first love, French Impressionist painters. (Sayeeda, UK)

Many participants emphasized that they were physically fit and active through activities such as hiking, jogging and weight lifting at the gym.

Nine women mentioned that they regretted not having had an opportunity to travel, which they would now like to do with their husbands. Interests and hobbies described by the participants rarely fell into stereotypically feminine categories. Women confessed to fascination with cars and football:

> I'm a total motor head when it comes to cars as i love prestige & performance cars also I love my sport Football, F1, Boxing and Cricket. (Asma, UK)

> well I love football, cars and shopping. What more can a girl want. A fast car to drive around, a car to carry all the shopping and come home to a match of Manchester utd on the telly. Bliss! (Sameera, UK)

Some of them embraced extreme sports:

> [I am] a bit of a tomboy too, like quad biking, not travelled for a while, I can swim and snorkel, fancy a crack at paintballing too. (LL70, UK)

> I have also recently taken up flying lessons which have been great fun. (Jasmine, UK)

This strong emphasis on traditionally masculine attributes (strength, stamina, courage) was evident also in Jagger's study (1998) on dating advertisements where she concluded that both men and women preferred to represent themselves as escaping traditional gender binaries. Whilst Jagger problematized such preferences in the context of a postmodern, consumer society, it is likely that women in this study would be more interested in framing their 'untraditionally feminine' lifestyle choices with the help of Islamic history and interpretations. Islam does encourage women to participate in sports, as it is documented that the Prophet Muhammad encouraged Aisha to run and the Qur'an orders Muslims to 'keep strong' (Walseth and Fasting 2003:52-54). It is also reported that Aisha, a role model for many contemporary Muslim women, fought

on the back of a camel in the Battle of the Camel in AD 656 (Phillips, 2003:33).

In the profiles, long accounts of sport-related interests tend to be balanced out with some references to more traditionally feminine pastimes, usually shopping. Only one participant listed cooking and housework as pastimes reflecting her 'feminine side'. It seems that shopping is mentioned deliberately as an activity that connects the participants to their feminine 'roots', as opposed to other activities – which are enjoyed because they are inherently enjoyable:

> I have a strong passion for a successful career; however , staying true to my female roots, I like shopping. (Jasmine, UK)

> Currently i spend most of my time at work and gym....a bit less time out shopping but don't be fooled i'm still a woman! (Asma, UK)

At the same time, one of the participants claims that she is 'not a fan of shopping for clothes, or designer stuff for hours on end, tedious to say the least', instead stating that she prefers to read 'NatGeo, New Scientist, current issues, History, Archaeology, and [is] becoming quite well read Islamically' and does not mind rats, worms, snakes, frogs and snails. In one breath she refuses to be seen as squeamish, focused on fashion, uninterested in science and politics, and, most importantly, religiously uneducated.

Fun was a concept strongly cutting across the dataset. Over half of the women described themselves as fun-lovers; they claimed to enjoy their lives, however, always within the limits of Islam – the *halal* way. Therefore, activities such as drinking, gambling and illicit sexual contacts, considered as fun by many non-Muslims, are not permitted. For example, Zahra remarked:

> Eating out! - cos lets face it , if you're a Muslim, I don't think there's much else to do - i mean we're hardly going to all go

out and hit the pub are we? So I luuurve eating out, that's generally THE activity that can bring all my family together for a bit of fam-o time - successfully! (Zahra, UK)

Islam is rarely linked to 'fun' in the literature, however, as these participants observe, fun can be *halal*, which has been confirmed by a positive fatwa regarding the comedy show *Allah Made Me Funny* issued by the Grand Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq (Van Nieuwkerk 2008:173). There are even Muslim female stand-up comedians, such as Shazia Mirza in the U.K. Leisure spaces seen as safe by South Asian women, discussed by Green and Singleton (2006) centre upon the community and family, and this is partly confirmed by this study. However, participants' narratives do not reflect the isolation and exclusion from public leisure spaces observed among Britsh Asian women by Parmar (1995).

Conclusions

This brief glimpse into Muslim women's online matchmaking profiles offers some insights into their priorities in life generally and in relation to the institution of marriage. Contrary to Adesina and Ayodele's argument (2004) that online matchmaking undermines marriage as an institution, this study has found that technology itself can hardly dictate priorities related to lifestyle choices; rather it facilitates choices grounded in religions or personal philosophies. Whilst the discussed websites constitute an alternative to traditional, family-facilitated matchmaking, they promote the idea of a *halal* Islamic marriage through enabling Muslims to find potential spouses independently.

There is not much sociological literature on Muslim marriages, or expectations related to marriage amongst Muslims in Europe and US. Due to a preoccupation with certain topics (mostly dress code and terrorism) many areas of 'ordinary' Muslim lives remain unstudied. This article gives a snapshot of the variety of ways of balancing and juxtaposing religious beliefs, personal-political positions, evolving gender relationships, lifestyles, and aspirations amongst Muslim women in the West.

Religion does not come across as a static concept constricted by a set number of rules. Women on these match-making sites often emphasize the significance of religion in their lives, their consciousness of their shortcomings as Muslims, and their willingness to develop themselves intellectually and spiritually as Muslims. A husband is seen as a partner and supporter in this learning process, not as a leader or head of family. Aside from setting the bar high in relation to religion, the women have carefully spelled out expectations regarding the character and the looks of the ideal spouse. They also express their reservations regarding his undesirable qualities, thus displaying well-defined visions of their future relationships. Such visions are usually built on concepts of compatibility, equality, partnership, friendship and physical attraction. Through independent spouse searching they are able to set these criteria and make the selection. They are, for example, able to judge whether a candidate is a 'good Muslim', i.e. whether his level of religiosity is appropriate. Thus, as far as their personal lives are concerned, they are able to exercise religious authority which comes with responsibility regarding religious and other choices.

This authority also allows them to set personal boundaries of *halal* behaviour; all participants in this study either pursue higher education or professional careers in areas such as nursing, management, science, accounting and finance. Some of them were never married, possibly due to work-related commitments. One of the participants said: "I admit that I have approached the topic of marriage with much patience whilst working hard to build my career". Others were divorced and their accounts of previous marriages suggested that they were the ones who initiated the divorce proceedings. As Islam gives the woman the right to divorce her husband, they did not act contrary to Islamic teaching.

Reynolds and Wetherell (2004) describe singleness as a 'troubled category' for women, as they state it is difficult to convincingly construct singleness in a positive way and subsequently choose to leave the category by entering a relationship; on the other hand, by idealizing marriage, women run the risk of being categorized as desperate and somehow

deficient spinsters. Imtoual and Hussein (2009) report that many single Muslim women find it difficult to construct singleness positively, in contrast to secular women in Reynolds and Wetherell's study, as they are unable to legitimately release their sexual desires outside of marriage. Faced with a lack of appropriate marriage partners in their immediate networks, they have to enact the 'myth of the happy celibate', a belief that it is possible to suppress female sexual desires whilst outside of marriage. This is not least because second- and third-generation Muslim girls are considered by many Muslim parents as inappropriately Westernised and therefore unsuitable to be their sons' wives (Imtoual and Hussein, 2009:28); in addition, these very girls often consider 'imported' partners as incompatible in terms of education and understanding of gender roles (2009:28). This reluctance to marry candidates from overseas is also evidenced by profiles in this study. Women do not wish to be 'visa providers', but also prefer partners with comparable levels of education and similar lifestyle choices. The willingness of many participants to find a husband (and, as it is indicated by high proportion of self-instigated divorces among them, to separate from one) suggests that the Islamic construction of marriage as a religious choice, and the ability to select a candidate through online matchmaking may render moving in and out of the singleness category less troubled for the Muslim women in this study as compared to women in Reynolds and Wetherell's (2004) research. As one of the women writes: 'Im not desperate by a looooooog shot, just trying to find someone Islamically suitable, for ME!' She clearly signals that she does not represent the 'desperate spinster' category, but portrays herself as a satisfied single woman who would consider moving out of the 'single category' only for a 'Islamically suitable' partner.

Engaging in activities traditionally perceived as the domain of men (paintball shooting, flying planes, repairing cars), they actively push the boundaries of femininity. Unlike Green and Singleton's British Asian female participants, they do not confine their movements to the sphere of the home and actively take advantage of opportunities the public sphere has to offer. At the same time, they do not construct their self-representation as entirely 'tomboyish career women' – they mention activities associated

with femininity, such as shopping, crafts, or watching the X-factor that somewhat balance out the other impression.

These women are willing be understood on the basis of neither gender nor religious stereotypes and extremes. They occupy what Khan (2000), drawing from Bhabha (1994), called the Muslim 'third space' - a space in between, *in between* Islamism and Orientalism, traditional and secular values, Muslim and non-Muslim environments. One participant said she was a 'proud British Muslim, a modern girl with a traditional twist', thus exemplifying these juxtapositions of seemingly distant concepts.

Further research exploration of Muslim women's 'non-orthodox' interests and experiences would contribute to a more complex understanding of their lives, at the moment represented in research mostly through the concept of *hijab*, and the grim phenomena of forced marriages and honor killings.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] This study is addressed in this paper due to the fact that Nigeria has the second largest Muslim population in Africa (78 million), being a multi-faith state with Muslims and Christians almost equaling in numbers.

[2] Similarly, the act of marriage may be facilitated by Internet services such as video chat and still remain within the bounds of Islamic permissibility. Such 'online' marriage is treated as 'marriage by proxy' as long as all the necessary documentation is signed by the interested parties (Beyer and Hussin 2010).

[3] In order to protect the identity of the participants I do not use their pseudonyms or the real names of the websites.

[4] Revert is a common term used to refer to converts to Islam, as it is widely believed that adopting Islam is in fact *returning* to the original religion, as opposed to merely *switching* to a different religion.

[5] The ritual prayer expected to be performed five times a day.

[6] This opens up the extensive debate on 'true Islam', and of course, except the fact that all Muslims acknowledge the Qur'an as the main source of Islam, there is no agreement on the validity of other sources and interpretations. For an informed discussion of the role of culture in Islamic thought by a prominent Muslim intellectual, see Ramadan (2009:183-206).

[7] Reynolds and Wetherell (2003:7) describe interpretative repertoires as 'recognizable routines of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes'.

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