# Online *Halal* Dating, *Ta'aruf*, and the Shariatisation of Matchmaking among Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims

## Eva F. Nisa

Australian National University

## Abstract:

Halal *(permissible according to Islamic law) matchmaking and anti-dating campaigns and businesses have mushroomed since the 2000s in Indonesia and neighbouring Malaysia. In Malaysia, the* Soul Seekers *of* Marriage Conference *was established in 2008 and* Halal Speed *Dating was launched in 2014. In Indonesia,* Rumah Taaruf MyQuran *(MyQuran's House to Get to Know Each Other) was founded in 2014 and Indonesia* Tanpa Pacaran *(Indonesia Without Dating) in 2015. In both countries, the presence of the internet and social media platforms coincided with Islam playing a greater role in public life. The thriving presence of Sharia-compliant matchmaking businesses using advanced communication technology signifies both the strengthening of conservativism and the manifestation of the growth of contemporary Muslim publics. This article will focus on the role of the internet and social media in Sharia-compliant matchmaking. Islamic theological doctrine stipulates that the Prophet Muhammad emphasised marriage as half of religion, denoting the importance of marriage to guard the chastity of Muslims. Therefore, the* halal *matchmaking and* ta'aruf *(getting to know each other) business have a flourishing market. The border between* halal *and non-*halal *online transactional matchmaking is, however, contestable. Online* halal *matchmaking also invites greater nuances in understanding the freedom and agency of Muslim women.*

## Keywords:

*Online, halal dating, gender, women, Malaysia, Indonesia*

## Introduction

The Islamic resurgence and upsurge in religious observance in Malaysia and Indonesia since the late 1970s and early 1980s can be seen from varied

expressions and habits of piety (Peletz 2013; see also Sloane-White 2017). Contemporary Muslim concern for piety has increasingly led to efforts to establish a *halal* (permissible according to Islamic law) lifestyle, including the presence of online *halal* dating and online-cum-offline *halal* matchmaking. These two majority Muslim countries in Southeast Asia have constantly witnessed transformations in Muslim marriage patterns. Jones (1981), in his studies on patterns of Muslim marriage and divorce in Malaysia, portrays the changes which occurred from 1950 to 1981. He records that in Peninsular Malaysia from around 1950 onwards the average age of marriage for girls was around seventeen, while in the 1970s, the average age was around twenty or twenty-one (1981, 259, 265). Historically, arranged marriage was one of the prevalent practices for finding a spouse in both countries, which eventually was tied with the occurrences of child marriages (Jones 2010, 3; Nilan 2008, 69; Nisa 2011, 808). Jones (1981, 261) also argued that long before 1950, in Peninsular Malaysia it was the norm, especially for women living in rural areas. Arranged marriages and early marriages were associated with tradition and love marriages with modernity and nationalism (Boellstorff 2004, 377; Jones 2004, 516). It is noteworthy that parent-arranged marriages were a significant contribution to the high number of divorce rates (Jones 1981, 263). Milner (2008, 190) argues that one of the main reasons for divorce was a lack of freedom in choosing a marriage partner.

What about the most current phenomenon in finding Muslim spouses? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among organisers of online *halal* matchmaking initiatives, this article looks at current trends in choosing a marriage partner among Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia. Besides digital ethnography, the fieldwork was conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Jakarta between 2015 and 2019. The primary data sources were collected through participant observations and interviews. Observations were made during events organised by the platforms *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*. This article approaches social media anthropologically, not only as institutions, and communicative practices, but also as cultural products that mediate social, political, economic, and religious activities.

In 2000, Helland introduces "religion online" referring to using online mediums to provide information, and "online religion" referring to the practising of religion online, such as online religious rituals and online religious communities. Further, while responding to criticism against his typology, he reformulates *online religion* and *religion online*, emphasising that the separation has become blurred (Helland 2007; Nisa 2019; Slama and Barendregt 2018). The dichotomy is untenable, especially because "doing" religion online can take varied forms. More importantly, today's divide between online and offline for many users hardly exists. Slama and Barendregt argue that within the context of Muslim piety in Southeast Asia there is, "a novel constellation of interfaces, that is an online/offline mix of relationships facilitated by new media […]" (2018, 19). This study also analyses the complexity of "doing" online–offline *halal* matchmaking and the selection of a marriage partner. Theological references used by the platforms in this study, especially the concepts of *halal* and Sharia compliance, signify their caution in copying non-*halal* web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications. They strive to facilitate *halal* online matchmaking by ensuring that not only the information shared online is *halal* but also that the entire matchmaking process can be considered as "doing" online–offline *halal* by its participants, their families, and the Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim publics in general.

The cases presented in this article, *Halal Speed Dating*, *Soul Seekers*, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* (MyQuran's House to Get to Know Each Other), and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* (Indonesia Without Dating), remind us of the growth of anti-Tinder-like platforms offered to cater to believers from various religious traditions. In recent years, the number of religious-based matchmaking apps has been growing, such as *Collide*, *ChristianMingle*, *JDate*, *CROSSPATHS*, and *Jfiix*. Muslim web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications are also thriving, such as *Singlemuslim* created in 2000 (United Kingdom), *LoveHabibi* in 2009 (European Arabs), *Ishqr* in 2013 (United States), *Muzmatch* in 2014 (United Kingdom and Bangladesh), *Salaam Swipe* in 2015 (Canada), and *Minder* in 2015 (United States; see Ali *et al*. 2019, 11; Bunt 2009, 105; De Rooij 2020, 6; Rochadiat, Tong and Corriero 2020, 150–151).

The application Tinder, which launched in September 2012, has been one of the most popular mobile dating applications globally (see Duguay 2017). Given Indonesia and Malaysia are considered to be "conservative" about dating, some young people in these countries have also been hesitant in welcoming Tinder (Valentina 2019). The growth of new publics, especially Muslim publics, in both countries since the late 1970s is evident from the increasing number of young Muslims wanting to accentuate their religiosity and has boosted anti-Tinder initiatives. Ong mentions that in the 1970s the *dakwah* (*daʿwa*, in Arabic, or proselytising) movement in Malaysia gained significant appeal with young, educated Malaysians (1995, 147–148; see also Peletz 2013, 607).

The current emergence of *hijrah* (religious transformation to become better Muslims) movements in Indonesia is a manifestation of a specific type of public Islam in Indonesia. The *hijrah* movements, which often have a special connection with various Islamic and Islamist movements, emphasise a return to what they perceive to be an Islamic lifestyle, including the replacement of dating with *ta'aruf* (*taʿāruf*, in Arabic, or getting to know each other) before marriage. Young Muslims initiating the *hijrah* movements, who campaign for *ta'aruf* and *halal* matchmaking, also clearly denote a fragmentation of religious authority in achieving what they believe is *al-maslaha al-ʿāmma* (common good) for public Islam. Following Eisenstadt's "multiple modernities," Salvatore and Eickelman (2004, xi) argue that the Muslim publics are born from articulations on Islam in public spheres which encompass varied initiatives and that new media is important in this context.

Studies on matchmaking platforms, including web-based dating and mobile dating applications, often emphasise how these platforms enable greater personal agency, especially for Muslim women who are often represented in the West as oppressed and backward (see Abu-Lughod 2006). There are nuances, however, in understanding female submission and agency in a broader discussion of religion and gender. Scholars – like Mahmood (2001), McNay (2018), and Werbner (2018) – for example, have focused on understanding agency in the capacity to act and make decisions. Mahmood

argues that agency should be seen "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001, 203). Others have criticised those who often see women as oppressed subjects of their religious cultures (Abu-Lughod 2013). The brains behind the platforms in this study are mostly men who hold strict understandings of Islam pertaining to marriage without dating. The agency of women participating in these platforms can be seen throughout the process of online–offline *halal* matchmaking. Their "capacity for action," to borrow Mahmood's phrase (2001), began the moment they decided to register themselves online.

The presence of communication technologies, the internet and social media platforms has the potential to challenge authority and hegemonic gender relations (Nisa 2019). Scholars whose work focuses on technology, such as phones and mobile phones, have raised this issue (see Doron 2012). The liberating and empowering aspects of these technologies have been seen as "disruptive," especially within patriarchal communities (Doron 2012, 419). Doron, in his study of mobile phone use in North India, explicates how "the mobile phone is viewed as an *object of distrust*, unless it is monitored by the husband and family. This distrust arises because of the flow of 'inside' information to the outside world […] may threaten the reputation and honour of the household" (2012, 425). The perceived liberating and empowering aspects of *halal* matchmaking platforms in my study are also prominent.

## Online–Offline Halal Matchmaking Platforms

On December 26 and 27, 2015 in Malaysia, I attended a fancy *dakwah*[1] event organised by transnational non-governmental organisation *Mercy Mission*, which was founded in the United Kingdom in 2007 and in Malaysia in 2011 (Nisa and Saenong 2018, 49). What struck me the most was a programme during this event called *Halal Speed Dating*, an event which I had never heard of (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Segregated entrance for male and female *Halal Speed Dating* participants (photo: author).[2]

*The Halal Speed Dating* was initiated in 2014 by a network of friends Zuhri Yuhyi, Norhayati Ismail, and Syed Azmi. It began when Zuhri and Norhayati teased Azmi who was still single. This led them to come up with an idea of not only helping Azmi but also other Malay Muslims to find spouses through a *halal* matchmaking program. Zuhri had insider experience of *halal* matchmaking. In 2012, he met his wife, Munirah Tunai – who also became involved in *Halal Speed Dating* – on another *halal* matchmaking platform. The couple married merely four months after their first meeting at a *halal* matchmaking event. Another founder, Norhayati, also met her husband through unconventional means: one of the earliest online and chatting platforms, *mIRC*.

During that event, I learnt that *halal* matchmaking was a new trend in Malaysia. At the same event, I discovered a bazaar booth called *Marriage QA*, owned by *Marriage Conference* (see Figure 2), which is another platform that offers marriage-related services, including a *halal* matchmaking service called *Soul Seekers*. *Marriage Conference* was founded in 2008 by Sajid Hussain. Hussain was born and raised in the UK and is also known as the "Marriage Maestro." Hussain contends that "the value of marriage has been eroded over time. Today […] it becomes common especially among Muslims where life has become more accepting in terms of dating, in terms of cohabiting, but

not marriage."[3] This phenomenon led him to create *Marriage Conference*, which he believes "can save the *umma* [Muslim community globally]."[4] He adds that since its establishment in 2008, *Marriage Conference* has been the leading Islamic marriage service provider. Based in Malaysia, *Marriage Conference* has organised events in various countries, including Turkey, Pakistan, Australia, and South Africa.[5]



Figure 2: *Marriage Conference* Booth

In 2017, Indonesia was rocked by the scandalous presence of *Partai Ponsel* (Cellphone Party) offering "*halal*" virginity auctions and "*halal*" secret marriage services under its programme *nikahsirri.com*. In 2021, Indonesians were offended by the presence of the short-lived platform *Aisha Wedding* which offered polygamy, secret marriage, and child marriage services. *Partai Ponsel* and *Aisha Wedding* are platforms that were inspired by the thriving initiatives to help Muslims find marriage partners. For example, the two other platforms in this study, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran,* were founded in 2014 and 2015 respectively (see Figure 3). Although these initiatives are not related structurally, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* are part of a broader movement of the *ta'aruf* trend, and similar to Malaysia's *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*, they signify an increasing presence of the *halal*isation of the Muslim lifestyle.

The presence of these online–offline *halal* matchmaking platforms reflects how global capitalism has attracted creative Muslims, including those of conservative strains, to adopt, adjust, and appropriate global products and initiatives, such as web-based matchmaking sites and mobile dating applications, to cater to the needs of contemporary Muslims. People in the business emphasised the concept of *halal* and non-*halal* (*haram*) as the main difference between their online–offline matchmaking business and conventional, non-*halal* platforms. This phenomenon aligns with what Rudnyckyj calls "Islamic spiritual economy" referring to a merging of "religious ethics" and "economic practices" (2009, 106; see also Hoesterey 2012, 39; Sloane-White 2017). Sloane-White, in her study on the Muslim capitalist experience, also reminds us to try to understand "[…] not only how the spread of global capitalism transforms the lives of Muslims and is transformed by them but how capitalism in this setting empowers the spread of Islam" (2017, 3).



Figure 3: *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran*'s offline event

## Halalisation of Matchmaking in Malaysia: Soul Seekers and Halal Speed Dating

Malaysia has witnessed a rising number of delayed marriages and resultantly singlehood. Yet, being single and unmarried has been considered an anomaly

in Malaysia, particularly among Malay Muslim women (Saili and Saili 2018, 80). Therefore, the pressure to marry is high, given that marriage is deemed a religious act in Islam, a combination between ʿibādah (act of devotion, the interaction between God and the believer) and muʿāmalah (dealings among human beings). Some well-educated mature women are even willing to be second, third, or fourth wives due to the pressure to be married and become a mother (Razif 2021, 9–10). The basic ruling of marriage in Islam is *sunnah* meaning those who abandon it are not sinful, yet those who conduct it will gain rewards. It can change into *wājib* (obligatory) for those who have strong sexual urges and are afraid of committing *zina* (adultery and fornication) if they do not marry. Verses in the Qur'an and a number of *ḥadīth* mention the importance of *nikāh* (marriage)*,* which have made it difficult for unmarried Muslims to neglect this practice. The Qur'an in *sūrah* (chapter) *Ar-Rūm* (30:21), for example, states, "and among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!"[6] In addition, a well-known *ḥadīth* says, "marriage is my *sunnah* [path or tradition], whoever disregards my *sunnah* is not from me [my nation]." Another *ḥadīth* narrated by Anas, one of the companions of Prophet Muḥammad, states he had said: "when a person gets married, he has perfected half of the religion; and he should fear Allah in the other half." This verse and *ḥadīth* provide a theological basis for anxiety about marriage. Syahidah (pseudonym), a 36-year-old participant of one of these *halal* matchmaking platforms, for example, says, "we all know that in Islam marriage is *sunnah,* right? I am already 36, so the pressure is high."[7] Syahidah's concern was also shared by all of the participants in this study, including their families who support them in this marital pathway initiative. Evidently understanding the nature of their market, mainly urban middle-class Muslims, the founders and staff of the *Soul Seeker*, *Halal Speed Dating*, *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran*, and *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* also often refer to these religious injunctions during interviews, in public statements and on their websites.

Most women who I interviewed complained about having limited time to find a potential spouse. Many of them were also worried about the pressure of being

single which usually came from their families. Although social media has had a liberating effect enabling them to find a spouse online, it is still crucial to receive parents' *restu* (approval), inherent in the idea of *birr al-wālidayn* (kindness and respect to parents) or filial piety. Noraida (pseudonym), 39 years old, says, "I am very busy every day. After working, I do not have time to do anything else. My family are worried seeing me single, but how am I able to find a husband then?"[8] The strong stigma of being single is reflected in two infamous terms used to designate unmarried women in the country, *anak dara tua* (*andartu*, or old virgin) and *anak dara lanjut usia* (*andalusia*, or old maiden). The common assumption is that unmarried women become old virgins and old maidens either because they are *tak laku* (not sellable) or *jual mahal* (playing difficult; Saili and Saili 2018, 80; in Indonesia see Smith-Hefner 2019, 99).

The state also plays an important role in ruling public morality. For Muslims in Malaysia, dating is subject to punishment. This pertains to the law of *khalwat* (illicit close proximity between genders) which is part of a regulation relating to sexual propriety applied only to Muslims under Syariah criminal laws. *Khalwat* is prohibited due to the assumption that it will lead to *zina,* thus, for precautionary measures, it has been deemed illegal since the beginning of the 20th century (Mohamad 2020, 171; see also Ismail 2016, 908). Every state in Malaysia has its own version of *Syariah Criminal Offences* which covers the *khalwat* ruling. *Syariah Criminal Offences* (Federal Territories) Act 1997, which is often regarded as the model by the federal government (Hui 2017, 169), for example, stipulates in section 27 "Khalwat":

> Any-
>
> (a) man who is found together with one or more women, not being his wife or *mahram*[9]; or
>
> (b) woman who is found together with one or more men, not being her husband or *mahram,*
>
> in any secluded place or in a house or room under circumstances

which may give rise to suspicion that they were engaged in immoral acts shall be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction to be liable to a fine not exceeding three thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to both.[10]

This kind of ruling, in addition to the broader spirit of Shariatisation in the country, opposes conventional dating as it is deemed to be violating Islamic law principles.

## *We are not a dating service!*

This statement can be found on *Soul Seekers'* website and is often mentioned by *Soul Seekers* founder and staff. Similarly, *Halal Speed Dating* emphasises that they are not a dating service. Both *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* highlight that they offer a Sharia-compliant or *halal* platform for Muslims. They accentuate their *halal* approaches as their main difference from other Muslim web-based dating sites and Muslim mobile dating applications. It is noteworthy that *Muzmatch*, one of the popular mobile dating applications for Muslims, also often refers to the concept of *halal* in its jargon, for example, "*Halal,* is it me you're looking for?" The age range of participants also overlaps, mobile dating application users are usually between 16 and 34 years of age (Rochadiat, Tong and Corriero 2020, 144), and *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* participants between 20 and 35[11]. *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* try to balance the online and offline processes carefully. The online platforms mostly serve as the participant's doors to showcase their profiles to *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*, which then allows invitations to the main offline events. The process of selecting a spouse does not happen online because participants do not have access to the details of others. They do this to maintain their *halalness*.

The same as other web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications, the processes of both *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* begin from online registration. Users complete a profile form requesting personal information, such as gender and date of birth; career information, such as occupation, income and career plan; and spouse preferences, such as marital status

and spouse age preference. In *Halal Speed Dating* there are also questions pertaining to prayers and donning of the *hijab* (veil) asking the participants to choose among "I pray 5 times a day; try to pray 5 times a day; I do the Sunnah [recommended] prayer as well;" for *hijab* "I wear a Hijab; I DON'T wear a Hijab; I TRY to wear Hijab." To cater to the needs of those who want to have a polygamous marriage, there is a set of polygamy questions: "I am a wife. Looking for another wife for my husband; I am a Married man. Looking for a second wife etc.; I DON'T mind being in a Polygamous marriage; […] I prefer Monogamy." The *Halal Speed Dating* team reviews all profiles to decide how many participants they will invite to the offline matchmaking event. Here lies the main difference between mobile dating applications and *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers*, where offline events are the core of the matchmaking programme. During the offline events, *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* gather selected participants from their online platforms into one big meeting room (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: The *Halal Speed Dating* participants come to the face-to-face main event.

Both platforms do not provide participants access to pictures of other participants and their contact numbers. Thus, there is no communication and no meeting before the offline matchmaking. During the main events, all participants are numbered. Thus, they do not know each other's name and they cannot exchange contact details during or after the events. They are provided with a select amount of time to speak to each other and are then required to cast a ballot of their selected candidates. At the end of the event, the team collects the forms and contact the candidates who match.

Although *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* share many similarities, there are internal contestations on what *halal* online matchmaking looks and sounds like. Both platforms use the concepts of *halal* and Sharia-compliant often interchangeably. According to *Halal Speed Dating*, the aspects that make them *halal* or Sharia-compliant are that they do not allow *haram* (impermissible) elements during the face-to-face event, such as flirting, touching, or exchanging contact details. In addition, the key to the Sharia-compliant platform is that they make it compulsory for every female participant to be chaperoned by a parent, relative, or a friend. This is in order to prevent *fitna* (temptation leading to unlawful behaviour).

*Soul Seekers* has criticised *Halal Speed Dating*'s practice, analogising it as "*halal* pork or *halal* alcohol"[12] signifying that the platform does not offer the true teaching of Islam by mixing permissible and impermissible matchmaking practices. They especially question the term "dating" in *Halal Speed Dating* arguing that their platform is different, "we offer a pathway to marriage not to dating."[13] *Soul Seekers* differentiates themselves from *Halal Speed Dating* by emphasising that: First, during *Soul Seekers*' event, the participants are grouped into five men and women and supervised by the facilitators. Different from *Halal Speed Dating*, they are not allowed to have a one-on-one direct discussion (see Figure 4). Second, as part of its wider project on educating Muslims in building a happy family, *Soul Seekers* participants, who have to pay 99 MYR, are obliged to attend a conference delivered by preachers from the *Soul Seekers* circle. The contestation also signifies that *halal*isation is not monolithic. This aligns with Peletz's argument on the complexity of the processes of Islamisation in Malaysia that is not monolithic (2013, 625).

The agentic capacity of the participants, including female participants, can be seen clearly in the first phase of the selection process when they decide to use the platform and submit their applications. Under the umbrella of Shariatisation and *halal*isation, *Soul Seekers* and *Halal Speed Dating* require family involvement in the following phases of the process. Rizwan (pseudonym), a 64-year-old man who accompanied his son, shared his feelings about *Halal Speed Dating*: "I did not know about this earlier. My son told me. I like this kind of format because there is no *khalwat* (close proximity). I will

recommend this to my friends, especially if my son is *berjaya* [successful] this time."[14] Outside the venue of *Halal Speed Dating*, while waiting for the event, I met Raihana (pseudonym), a 66-year-old lady accompanying her daughter Noorayna (pseudonym). She shared her feelings: "I am accompanying my daughter. I am nervous now. I did not have this before. But, now is different. Insya Allah [God willing] she will meet someone who prays five times a day diligently. I do not want to have a son-in-law who does not pray."[15] *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* can be regarded as part of the Sharia craze that encourages every aspect of Muslim life to align with what they believe is Sharia-compliant. This refers to the zeal of these Muslims to return to what they believe is the true path of Islam. Although there is internal contestation between the two platforms, the way they have "monopolised" the terms *halal* and Sharia have been successful in gaining support from the wider Malaysian public. The presence of chaperones signifies how the changing practice of finding a spouse has been responded to positively by the older generation or the participants' parents. Indeed, the Shariatisation or *halal*isation of online matchmaking reflects the deindividualized trend of spouse selection in the latter phase of the matchmaking selection process.

## Grounding *Ta'aruf* in Indonesia

The two platforms studied in Indonesia are: (1) *Rumah Taaruf MyQuran* (*RTM*) founded by Tri Wahyu Nugroho which aims to provide an online–offline *halal* platform for Muslims who want to get married without dating; (2) *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* (*ITP*) created by La Ode Munafar with participants ranging between 25 and 35 years of age. Their opposition towards dating and their focus on *ta'aruf* before marriage can be regarded as a continuation of the *ta'aruf* initiatives zealously supported by conservative movements in the country (Nisa 2011, 808). An example is the Tarbiyah movement, a *dakwah* movement inspired by *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (the Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt which later gave birth to the Islamist party *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (the Welfare Justice Party). Indeed, the founders of RTM and ITP have a strong connection with the *dakwah* movement. Tri began to understand *ta'aruf* when he studied at Institut Teknologi Bandung (Bandung Institute of Technology) in an Electrical Engineering Programme. He recounts, "I also know my wife

from my mentor" through *ta'aruf* before he finally married her in 2008. The Tarbiyah *ta'aruf* inspired him to create RTM. La Ode Munafar understood *ta'aruf* from high school, when he was active in Rohis (Kerohanian Islam or Islamic Spirituality). Rohis is a *dakwah* focus of the Tarbiyah movement for high school students, in which Tarbiyah activists are active in spreading their influence to secondary students, especially through Islamic mentoring programmes.

Within the Tarbiyah Movement dating is forbidden and *ta'aruf* is the norm (see also Smith-Hefner 2019, 37). Creating the family of the Tarbiyah Movement is their commitment. In 2006, its political vehicle *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, for example, created a programme called *Tarbiyah Aliyah* (Family Education) and BKKBS (the Welfare Family Counselling Bureau; Savitri and Faturochman 2011, 65). Religious homogamy within *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* is aimed at creating what they believe as a *dakwah* family who can work together to spread the movement's *dakwah* and to cement group identity and cohesion (see also Nisa 2011, 797). Within the Tarbiyah Movement, matchmaking has usually been facilitated by *murabbi* (male mentor) and *murabbiyah* (female mentor), at least during the early phase of the presence of this movement.[16] This involves exchanging personal data, curriculum vitae, and, sometimes, pictures.

Through the influence of Rohis activities by the Tarbiyah Movement, Munafar admits that his mission is to help others break up with their girlfriends or boyfriends. His concerns about the dangers of promiscuity, the increasing number of abortions, as well as the forbidden relationships between married men and women in Indonesia are some of his stimuli to initiate ITP. Munafar's ITP has popularised the *ta'aruf* trend, especially among young Muslims who want to perform *hijrah* or to "return to Islam," including Rohis and campus *dakwah* activists. ITP uses various channels for its online *dakwah* campaigns, including Instagram with 970 thousand followers[17], Facebook Fan Page followed by 502 thousand[18], Facebook Group with 861.4 thousand members[19], YouTube with 7.17 thousand subscribers[20], Twitter with 5 thousand followers[21], Telegram with 1.70 thousand subscribers[22], Line, and WhatsApp groups. The way Munafar uses these platforms resonates with Madianou and

Miller's concept of polymedia. Madianou and Miller argue that polymedia not only refers to an environment of abundant media resources but "[…] it is how users exploit these affordances in order to manage their emotions and their relationships" (2013, 172). This, for example, can be seen from the way Munafar used various avenues to adjust to diverse contexts, namely, to continuously create strong opinions to influence public hearts and minds to believe that "dating can ruin the future of Indonesian young generations."[23] In the name of *dakwah,* ITP has a routine WhatsApp *kajian* (Islamic study circle) on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Munafar asks ITP members to share or broadcast the contents of the ITP *kajian* in their social media accounts to create public opinion to counter the mainstream dating culture. He carefully crafts the ITP to reach its objective of cementing public opinion. This includes carefully mapping the target audience, most notably young Muslims, and prudently scheduling the posting frequency. Munafar recounts, "every day, we have a target of 1k additional followers on Instagram […] On Instagram, the slowest gap between posts is one hour."[24] Besides online activities, ITP also organises offline activities, such as seminars, giveaway bulletins and free books, as well as conducting rallies against dating culture in the country. The presence of ITP through its various channels can be regarded as an important door for many *ta'aruf* initiatives in Indonesia to flourish, like those of RTM. The online and offline campaigns of *ta'aruf* and "no dating in Islam" are also supported by the presence of public figures who conduct *hijrah* to become better Muslims, such as Teuku Wisnu, Dewi Sandra, Arie Untung, Dimas Seto, Oki Setiana Dewi, Zaskia Sungkar, Irwansyah, and Vebby Palwinta (see Nisa 2019, 445).

Looking closely at the matchmaking procedure adopted by RTM we can also see a strong influence from the Tarbiyah movement.[25] RTM asks its participants to submit their short bio – without names, contact numbers, and social media accounts – and they will select the bios and number them so that they can be uploaded to their website. Tri understands the controversy of providing a picture in this *halal* matchmaking scheme, however, he argues, "long time ago, I used to hide the picture from the bio. But after long consideration, there is a humanistic side that they want to see the prospective match too, in particular, their face."[26] If there is a match, then they can ask each other

further questions via email, followed by a direct face-to-face meeting with the presence of a mediator. If they both agree to continue, they can introduce each other's family and their close circle of friends and colleagues. This kind of practice can be regarded as a more organised online-cum-offline version of Tarbiyah *ta'aruf*. Similar to *Soul Seekers* and *Halal Speed Dating*, RTM's later phase of *ta'aruf* also involves parents' *restu* in order to honour parents and parents' rights in Islam.

## *Halal* Online and Women's Agency?

All the platforms in this study claim that they follow Sharia rulings, that their initiative is *halal* or Sharia-compliant. The varied interpretations of *halalness* and contestation regarding what is *halal* are prevalent in this context. *Halal Speed Dating* and *Soul Seekers* try to limit themselves to create online mediums which serve as tools for their main offline matchmaking events. RTM, on the other hand, facilitates the choosing of prospective spouses online and early interactions between candidates also occur online. RTM's version of Sharia compliance can be seen from the place of offline *ta'aruf* which are mostly mosques. Indeed, mosques are widely known as a central hub of Tarbiyah activities and campus *dakwah* activities in general. Tri mentioned that around 70–80 percent of offline *ta'aruf* are held in mosques. The *halal* aura can be seen from the procedure of offline *ta'aruf* in which the mediator asks the man to read the Qur'an. Tri says, "the aim is to find out the ability of the man to read the Qur'an. Usually women want to be *diimami* (led in the prayer) by their husbands."[27] To maintain its Sharia-compliant mechanism, RTM allows a maximum of six months after the offline *ta'aruf* to arrange a marriage. Tri states, "we will not allow someone to participate in this *ta'aruf* who is planning to arrange the marriage next year."[28] This is maintained to differentiate between their *ta'aruf* platform and Muslim mobile dating applications. These varied practices of *halalness* reflect not only the different interpretations of *halalness* but also signify how Muslims produce varied *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) when facing new conditions.

Looking closely at the practice of *halal* matchmaking on these platforms, analysing the position of women is especially important. Women's participation

in these *halal* matchmaking platforms exceeds the participation of men in both countries. In RTM, for example, they usually have two hundred male participants and nine hundred female participants. At the same time, studies on online dating, internet chatting, and mobile literacy, including those of Muslim women, often mention how these activities signify women's freedom, agency, and expression of self (Ali *et al.* 2019, 2; Bennett 2005, 101; Doron 2012, 418; De Rooij 2020, 15; Slama 2010, 316). De Rooij contends, "the concept of courting, and in turn, love and marriage, whether initiated online or offline, is related to the postmodern discourse on freedom and agency" (2020, 15). Slama uses the term "agency of the heart" referring to the way users of online chats are "raising personal problems, having a heart-to-heart talk, opening up emotionally" (2010, 323). In contexts where gender mixing is strictly regulated, like through the anti-*khalwat* policy in Malaysia and "no dating culture" among conservative Muslims in Indonesia, *halal* online matchmaking challenges the assumption that women living within strict Muslim lifestyles are unable to exercise their agency. These liberating and empowering aspects of the technologies can be perceived as disruptive, especially within strong patriarchal communities. In the context of *halal* matchmaking, the disruption is evidence through women's greater control over spouse selection and interactions made possible via participation on the platforms.

Women's agency can be seen clearly in *Halal Speed Dating*, *Soul Seekers*, and RTM in the stage when they register to be the participants of *halal* matchmaking and to navigate the strict protocols upheld by their community and religious group. A careful analysis of this practice, however, invites us to think carefully about the complexity of the notion of agency. Adding to this complexity, online dating, online marriage services, *ta'aruf*, and no dating campaigns initiated by Muslims with conservative understandings of Islam and gender relations, have become significant problems faced by progressive Muslim women's activists and Islamic feminists when combating violence against women (Nisa 2018, 301). This is due to the presence of varied key players in online dating and online marriage services practising illegal business, such as online unregistered *siri* (secret) marriage, "virginity auctions" initiated by *nikahsirri.com*, and child marriage by *Aisha Wedding*.

In addition, the growth of online *ta'aruf* campaigns, such as Munafar's ITP, has encouraged the spread of early marriage practices which has become the main concern of women's movements in the country (Nisa 2020, 83). The *ta'aruf* and online early marriage campaigns like *@gerakannikahmuda* (@earlymarriagemovement, 434 thousand Instagram followers)[29], *@beraninikahtakutpacaran* (@daretomarryfearofdating, 145 thousand Instagram followers)[30], and *@dakwahjomblo* (@singleMuslim's *dakwah,* 613 thousand Instagram followers)[31], have garnered significant online and offline popularity, amidst the country's long battle against early marriages and the rise of divorces.

The notion of women's agency might be questioned when the mediators play an important role in the process of matching, especially in the case of RTM. Tri mentioned that mostly men request the detailed personal information of the female candidates first. RTM then forwards it to them. If a man likes a female candidate, then RTM will contact the selected woman, if not then they will not contact her. The selected woman can accept the invitation to get to know the man better by asking some questions via email, or she can refuse him if she feels they do not match. Tri argues that this arrangement signifies that "men are winning to choose, while women are winning to refuse them."[32] This might seem that women do not have full capacity to exercise their agency due to patriarchal norms guiding this practice. This aspect of submission has become one of the conundrums in the study of women and religion. The assumption that women are oppressed due to their submission to patriarchal systems or in the context of this study, patriarchal aspects of mate selection, is a misunderstanding. Many scholars have challenged this kind of assumption and emphasised how religious practices might facilitate new forms of agency and how women's agency or agentic capacity can be expressed in their participation in religious movements and patriarchal religious systems (Mahmood 2001; McNay 2018; Werbner 2018). Thinking about agency as a synonym for resistance according to Mahmood, "[…] sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions." (2001, 203).

Therefore, following the "rule of the game" in RTM by not nominating the man is also the manifestation of these women's agency. Many of them believe that this practice indeed can save their dignity so that they do not have to experience shame from early rejection. Salamah (pseudonym), a 25-year-old participant, recounts her story:

> I like the system in RTM. I think it is great to let the men choose first, but the decision is in our [women's] hand. Whether we want to continue or not. Rather than we inform RTM that we like this and that men, but then when the RTM as the mediator contacts them they all reject our offer for *ta'aruf*.[33]

Many women share Salamah's view. The system for them saves them from feeling "rejected" at the early stage of *ta'aruf*. Thus, for these women, participating in this kind of initiative enables them to exercise their agency. Analysing their agency should consider the contexts in which their choices are made.

## Conclusion

While earlier studies have shown positive trends in the increasing age of marriage in Malaysia and Indonesia, especially in the urban context, nowadays both countries face the complicated and often contradictory trend of difficulties in finding marriage partners, particularly for women, and the gradual transformation from parent-arranged marriage to the choosing of a spouse by individuals through the assistance of advanced technology. This study demonstrates the ambivalence of the process of marriage partner selection through *halal* online–offline matchmaking. The platforms might be seen as a push to completely individualised marriage partner selection, but in fact, it does not totally individualise the entire process. Indeed, the platforms' *halal* or Sharia-compliant labels signify the importance of deindividualizing the process, which is apparent in the later stages of the process through parent's *restu* as the manifestation of Islamic filial piety or *birr al-wālidayn*.

The resurgence of piety, evident in increasing rates of public religious expression as a manifestation of growing Muslim publics, has facilitated the growth of online early marriage campaigns as well as *halal* online matchmaking services. The mushrooming of web-based dating sites and mobile dating applications is considered by many as indicating the agency of women and youth (see e.g., Ali *et al.* 2019; De Rooij 2020). However, the fact that *halal* matchmaking is initiated in the name of Sharia compliance often complicates the understanding of the notion of agency. The submission of women to patriarchal norms, which is embedded in these platforms and is reflected in the whole process of mate selection, might be confused with a lack of agency. Aligning with the views of scholars who have challenged this understanding of agency as a synonym for resistance to domination, their agency, however, can be seen in their capacity to act and navigate patriarchal norms upheld by the platforms. Indeed, the agency of these women is beyond total submissiveness, as mentioned by Mahmood, which can involve cultivated virtues of shyness and feminine passivity. These platforms demonstrate women's ability to outstrip their shyness and take control of marriage partner selection.

This article also demonstrates how the presence of these *halal* online–offline matchmaking platforms and their emphasis on being different to mobile dating applications to strengthen their *halal* position reflects long-standing debates about the relationship between religion, religious communities, economic life, and the online world. The concerns of using the terms Sharia-compliant and *halal* signify the ongoing spirit of the Shariatisation of Muslim lifestyles and the expansion of Muslim capitalist experiences in both countries. At the same time, the presence of these platforms using religious language demonstrates the incessant competition over legitimate interpretations of Islamic teachings.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

[1] I label this fancy *dakwah* because it was held in a world-class international venue, *Putrajaya International Conference Centre*, and designed to cater to the needs of urban middle-class to upper-middle class Muslims.

[2] All photos in this article were taken by the author.

[3] Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

[4] Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

[5] The transnational aura of *Marriage Conference* can also be seen from its invited speakers in every event they organize. Sajid also admitted that he intentionally invited more international than local speakers, such as those from the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Canada.

[6] This is taken from Muhammad Asad's translation and explanation of the Qur'an (1980).

[7] Syahidah, 2017, interview with author, January 5, Suria KLCC.

⁸ Noraida, 2015, interview with author, December 28, Bangsar Village.

⁹ *Mahram* refers to members of one's close relatives with whom marriage would be considered *haram* (impermissible) or a state of consanguinity precluding marriage.

¹⁰ Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 559, Part IV - offences relating to decency, section 27, Khalwat, 1997. http://www2.esyariah.gov.my/esyariah/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng_act_lib.nsf/f0a1dd6010da414b48256815001bd4fc/ec9f2cc63ff92e5fc8256826002d1760?OpenDocument.

¹¹ Munirah, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Coffee Shop Bangsar.

¹² Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

¹³ Sajid Hussain, 2015, interview with author, December 27, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

¹⁴ Rizwan, 2015, interview with author, December 26, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

¹⁵ Raihana, 2015, interview with author, December 26, Putrajaya International Conference Centre.

¹⁶ Nowadays, there are some occurrences in which those whose parents are the first generations of this movement also engage in *dakwah* family matchmaking by introducing their children to the children of other cadres.

¹⁷ This is per April 20, 2021, 9:50 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021a).

¹⁸ This is per April 20, 2021, 9:51 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021b).

¹⁹ This is per April 20, 2021, 9:58 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021c).

²⁰ This is per April 20, 2021, 9:49 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021d).

²¹ This is per April 20, 2021, 9:59 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021e).

²² This is per April 20, 2021, 9:55 p.m. (see Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran 2021f).

[23] La Ode Munafar, 2016, interview, August 30, Jakarta.

[24] La Ode Munafar, 2016, interview, August 30, Jakarta.

[25] Although the role of the Tarbiyah Movement is important in popularising a (strict) *ta'aruf* culture, other conservative movements, such as Tablighi Jama'at and various Salafi movements are also staunch supporters of *ta'aruf* (see Nisa 2011).

[26] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[27] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[28] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[29] This is per April 20, 2021, 10:18 p.m. (Gerakan Nikah Muda 2021).

[30] This is per April 20, 2021, 10:19 p.m. (Berani Nikah Takut Pacaran 2021).

[31] This is per April 20, 2021, 10:20 p.m. (Inspirasi Dalam Berhijrah 2021).

[32] Tri Wahyu Nugroho, 2016, interview, May 17, Jakarta.

[33] Salamah, 2018, interview with author, June 21, Jakarta.