



**What does the use of online
matrimonial sites reveal about
British Muslim women today?**

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September 2016.

Abstract.

In this dissertation, I explore what the use of online matrimonial sites reveals about British Muslim women today. I consider the challenges that Muslim women face as they encounter new technologies, and discuss the ongoing debate about what is considered halal or haram. I discuss the reasons as to why increasing numbers of Muslim women in Britain are opting to use online matrimonial sites as opposed to more traditional methods, and link this to a desire for more freedom and choice in the marriage process. There is a distinct lack of existing academic research on this topic and so this project asks fundamental questions to begin an exploration into this field. My research is qualitative in nature and consists of five semi-structured interviews conducted with Muslim women living in Cardiff. The resulting data has been analysed from a social constructionist approach in order to discern how the women using these technologies understand them and create meaning in terms of their religious identity.

My findings indicate that matrimonial sites are providing a new, empowering social arena for Muslim women, and at least in an online context, their use shows a change in traditional gender roles during the marriage process. This research also shows that there is a growing inter-generational gap, and that Muslim women are developing a different identity to the previous generation. The cultural values of older generations are becoming less important, and a clash of values has led to difficulty in parents being able to choose suitable partners for their daughters from their existing social networks, hence the growing popularity of online matrimonial sites. Finally, I conclude that the increasing use of online matrimonial sites highlights the struggles that some women in the Muslim community face when trying to find a partner through more traditional means, in particular divorcees and converts to Islam.

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Introduction.

According to some of the grandest claims, today one in five relationships start online¹ and approximately 15 million people in the UK are members of online dating websites or apps.² Whether or not these numbers are inflated for marketing purposes, it is certainly the case that the Internet is providing a new social arena in which to meet potential partners, and Muslims in Britain are taking advantage of this new digital space. Singlemuslim.com was founded in 2000 by Adeem Younis, who was an undergraduate university student at the time. In recent years, the website has celebrated reaching the milestone of over one million members – a clear testament to the increasing popularity of online matchmaking in contemporary Britain. Other apps, such as Muzmatch, claim to have over 80,000 Muslims signed up. It is of course in the commercial interests of these websites to emphasise the success of their membership, but although these numbers cannot be definitively verified, the claims of these companies do suggest that a significant number of Muslims in Britain, and indeed globally, are using the new arena provided by the Internet in order to find a spouse.

However, there is a distinct lack of academic literature researching this phenomenon. In this dissertation, I explore the question, “what does the use of online matrimonial sites reveal about British Muslim women today?” through a number of qualitative interviews with Muslim women in Cardiff. Research into previously unexplored areas of Muslim communities in Britain is necessary in order to promote greater understanding which, in my opinion, leads to increased inter-faith community engagement and cohesion. I choose to focus on the experiences of women in particular for a number of reasons. Firstly, given my non-Muslim status, researching the opinions of Muslim women is more practical than the experiences of men in terms of access, positionality and gatekeepers. Secondly, I believe that the new social space provided by the Internet is significant for Muslim women especially, in that it could operate as an empowering space for women, in a matchmaking culture that some may argue does not traditionally stress the personal preferences of women. Syma Mohammad, for example, states the “Muslim women, unlike men, are restricted as to whom they can marry”.³ If this is the case, the success of online matrimonial sites could represent a shift or redefinition of gender roles within Muslim communities in Britain.

My research aims and objectives are as follows. Firstly, I wish to consider what challenges in the encounter of new technologies and social trends might be distinct for Muslims living in Britain. For those who identify with Islam, the halal/haram consideration weighs heavily, both in

¹ <https://infogr.am/uk-online-dating-statistics> (Accessed 09/06/2016.)

² <http://visual.ly/uk-online-dating-stats-dating-friends> (Accessed 09/06/2016.)

³ S. Mohammad, “Why British Muslim women struggle to find a marriage partner”

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/jan/18/british-muslim-women-marriage-struggle> (Accessed 04/08/2016.)

reference to relationships with people and also to relationships with technology; therefore British Muslims are constantly having to discern and re-evaluate what is considered “halal” (permissible) and “haram” (forbidden) as they gain access to new developments and technologies. Secondly, I aim to explore why increasing numbers of British Muslim women are opting to use matrimonial sites in order to find a partner as opposed to more traditional methods and to consider whether the use of online matrimonial sites is linked to a desire for more freedom and choice in the matchmaking process by British Muslim women.

It is important to acknowledge that dating, as it is understood in a Western context, is viewed as “haram” in Islam, and so it would be inaccurate to describe the use of the Internet to find a Muslim spouse as “online dating”. Many Muslim matrimonial websites make it clear that they are a halal option, and that signing up as a member is Islamically acceptable, though there is some debate about this within the global Muslim community. For example, Imam Yahya Hendi, a Muslim chaplain in Georgetown, North America, “said he has received many requests to serve as an intermediary for Muslim couples who have gotten to know each other through the Web, and he has rarely heard anyone in the Muslim community object to the online courtships.”⁴ However, in Kuala Lumpur, attitudes towards online matrimonial sites are vastly different. The Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) states that marriage should be sought out in appropriate places, such as the mosque, rather than through the Internet.⁵ The key difference between Muslim matrimonial websites and more general dating websites is the emphasis on marriage. Marriage is considered to be half of the Islamic faith and so is a vital and obligatory part of every Muslim’s life. As well as being important for religious reasons, marriage is also viewed as crucial for social relations between Muslims. Gilliat-Ray states that:

Muslims often regard marriage as the joining together of two families. A good match can enhance the honour and reputation of both families, while a poor or failed marriage can bring social disgrace.⁶

Since marriage plays such a significant role in Muslim communities, research into changes and developments in the matrimonial process is key in order to promote a better understanding of Muslims in Britain.

⁴ D. Cho, “For Muslims, Courtship Enabled by the Internet” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A18646-2004Jun5.html> (Accessed 04/08/2016).

⁵ <http://www.news24.com/World/News/Find-love-in-the-mosque-20040512> (Accessed 04/08/2016).

⁶ S. Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 139.

Further to promoting a more detailed understanding of Muslims in Britain, I believe this research project is relevant to the field in a number of other ways. It contributes to the recent discussion on an emerging Muslim “cyberspace” and also to the existing academic literature regarding the British Muslim “identity”, particularly regarding a new, hybrid and empowering identity for British Muslim women.⁷ There has been much debate as to whether or not Muslims living in Britain can reconcile their faith with Western values, and in this dissertation, I discuss whether online matrimonial sites represent a synthesis of Islamic principles with Western methods. Finally, this research project adds to discussions about the increasing inter-generational gap in Muslim communities in Britain today. Samuel claims that, especially in Muslim families from a South Asian background:

Marriage is a particular source of tension and conflict. The elder generation is generally committed to the idea of arranged marriage. While this does not mean that young people have no say in whom they marry, since many parents allow some degree of negotiation and involvement by their children, young people are not necessarily free to marry whom they choose.⁸

The move from “arranged marriages” to “assisted marriages” has been aided by the development of online matrimonial websites.

The remainder of my dissertation is made up of the five following sections. I turn now to a literature review, during which I briefly discuss and critically analyse the existing academic literature relevant to this question. I assess where there are gaps in the field, and explain how my research aims to contribute to those gaps. In the next section, I outline my methodology: the philosophical principles which underpin my approach; issues of reflexivity and positionality; and a description of the actions I took prior to, during, and after conducting my qualitative research. Next, I present the findings of my qualitative interviews, and I then discuss the implications and significance of these results, making critical comparisons with the existing academic research outlined in the literature review. Finally, I offer my conclusions, reflect on how I could have improved on my project, and suggest a number of ways in which others might build on my findings in future research projects.

⁷ See literature review.

⁸ G. Samuel, “Islam and the family in Bangladesh and the UK: The background to our study”, *Culture and Religion* 13:2 (2012), pp. 141-158, p. 144.

Literature Review.

The purpose of this literature review is to outline the existing academic literature surrounding my research topic, in order to show what has already been discovered in this area and to locate gaps in the field to which I hope this project will contribute. Given that the use of Muslim matrimonial websites in Britain specifically is significantly under-researched, I have broken down my analysis of the wider literature into various sub-sections: globalisation; Muslims and technology; online dating in general; and finally, online matrimonial websites; and finally. Giddens argues that globalisation “influences everyday life as much as it does events happening on a world scale”.⁹ He discusses the decline of “tradition”, not only in the West or in public institutions, but in all aspects of life and on a global scale.¹⁰ He argues that the most important change that has resulted from globalisation is the impact it has had on personal and family relationships: “traditional family systems are being transformed... in many parts of the world, particularly as women stake claim to greater equality”.¹¹ As women become empowered and “as the influence of tradition and custom shrink... the very basis of our self-identity - our sense of self - changes”;¹² the result of which is a revolution in “how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others”.¹³ The shift from more traditional means of finding a partner in the Muslim community in Britain, such as arranged marriage, to more modern methods, such as online matrimonial sites, is an example of this transformation of family systems and “how we form ties and connections with others”. I argue, like Giddens, that one reason behind this development is a change in the identity of British Muslim women, as they desire more freedom or “greater equality” in the matchmaking process.

Castells also argues that “our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalisation and identity”.¹⁴ Like Giddens, he discusses the decline of tradition through generations and the resulting impact on roles within the family:

New generations are being socialised out of the traditional pattern of the patriarchal family, and are being exposed from an early age to the need to cope with different settings, and different adult roles.¹⁵

⁹ A. Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives*, 2nd edition, (London: Profile Books, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 43.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 12.

¹² *ibid.* p. 47.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 51.

¹⁴ M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 1.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 299.

According to Castells, globalisation has caused an “individualisation of relationships within the family”, and thus more importance is being attributed to personal demands and desires rather than traditional expected roles.¹⁶ He also emphasises the role played by technological developments, particularly the creation of the Internet, in the process of globalisation. He states that “because culture is mediated and enacted through communications”, technology that alters the way people communicate with one another, such as the use of the Internet, ultimately has the power to fundamentally transform cultures.¹⁷ Castells also suggests that the development of the Internet has been especially transformative for women, who, like other traditionally oppressed groups, “seem to be more likely to express themselves openly through the protection of the electronic medium”, which could result in a reversal of traditional power relations.¹⁸ Like Giddens and Castells, I argue that the changes caused by globalisation and the development of the Internet have noticeable social implications, and have disrupted traditional patterns and gender roles.

Given that the development of technology has a considerable impact on culture and society, these changes have produced a number of challenges for Muslims in Britain. Weiss states that:

Entering the twenty-first century, Muslim societies are struggling in their confrontations with the enormous cultural dilemmas as they are rethinking, renegotiating and in some instances re-inventing traditional society but with unique, modern tones.¹⁹

Ramadan writes extensively about the challenges facing Muslims living in the West, and how it is possible to adhere to Islamic rules within a Western society. He argues that with regards to fundamental religious principles, there is a margin allowed for “evolution, transformation, and adaption to various social and cultural environments”, which is especially important for younger Muslims who are keen to reconcile their religious values with their Western identity.²⁰ He states that in order to adapt to Western societies, Muslims must distinguish between what parts of Islam are unchangeable (*thabit*) and what parts are subject to change (*mutaghayyir*).²¹ As they gain access to and engage with new developments and technologies, for example, the Internet, Muslims as individuals must reconsider and redefine what is halal and what is haram, i.e., “what they may do in conscience and what they should avoid”.²²

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 299.

¹⁷ M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 357.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 390.

¹⁹ A.M. Weiss, “Challenges for Muslim women in a postmodern world” in A.S Ahmed and H. Donnan (eds.) *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 127-140, p. 127.

²⁰ T. Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 9.

²¹ *ibid.* p. 9.

²² *ibid.* p. 96.

Using the Internet as a medium through which to find a partner is a clear example of how globalisation has impacted traditional societal norms regarding relationships. Before considering the implications of this phenomenon within a Muslim context, I turn first to a brief analysis of the existing literature regarding online dating in general that I feel is pertinent to my own research project. There is an abundance of academic literature regarding online dating in general, though the majority of research thus far has taken place in an American context. McWilliams and Barrett contribute to this topic by exploring the differences in experiences of using online dating websites between genders and generations.²³ They focused their research on middle aged and older men and women, a group they argued are under-researched, given that they are “often stereotyped as lacking interest in intimate, particularly sexual relationships”.²⁴ They suggest that given their age, older people are more likely to have experienced long-term relationships, and so their use of online dating sites as they re-enter the dating market will differ from people of a younger generation.²⁵

As well as the difference in generations, McWilliams and Barrett discuss the differences in experiences between genders, stating that “dating opportunities are also limited in gender-specific ways”.²⁶ They suggest that:

Women choosing to use online dating websites may be more proactive than others in their searches for romantic partners. It is also plausible that the structure of online dating itself facilitates women’s exercise of greater control over the dating process, with differences particularly pronounced for middle-aged and older women who were socialized in earlier life stages to more passive roles in dating.²⁷

Although McWilliams and Barrett’s research discusses general online dating, many of their conclusions were helpful when preparing for my own project. Given that a number of my participants fell into the category of middle aged or older women, I felt their results would also apply to women in the same age range in a Muslim context. It is important to note, however, that my sample size of participants in this project is small, and so generalisation of these types of statements is somewhat limited. Also, in traditional Muslim marriage, parents play a large part in the matchmaking process and then it is men who ultimately make the proposals; therefore women play more “passive roles”. One of my research aims for this project is to discover whether or not

²³ S. McWilliams and A.E. Barrett, “Online Dating in Middle and Later Life: Gendered Expectations and Experiences”, *Journal of Family Issues* 35:3 (2014), pp. 411-436.

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 412.

²⁵ *ibid.* p. 413.

²⁶ *ibid.* pp. 413/4.

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 414.

online matrimonial sites have created a new, empowering space for women that have started to redefine these traditional gender roles. This will link in a similar way to the argument of McWilliams and Barrett that online dating in general “facilitates women’s exercise of greater control over the dating process”.²⁸

Barraket and Henry-Waring discuss the use of online dating as a solution to the potential lack of romantic options in one’s existing network:

One of the most commonly cited culturally transformative possibilities of online dating is their capacity to overcome the tyranny of distance, time and space to allow for the establishment of new networks and patterns of interactivity.²⁹

Their study found that one of the most significant draws to the use of online dating was the ability to meet people from outside of your usual community, and like McWilliams and Barrett, they discussed the concept of more “freedom” in the selection process.³⁰ Their findings also suggested that although their participants wanted to look further afield for a potential partner, “they were still broadly looking for people from within their own communities of characteristic [and] interest”.³¹ Within my limited sample, I was consistently told that one of the main reasons British Muslim women are increasingly using online matrimonial sites is because of a lack of satisfactory marriage prospects within their own kinship networks, though it is still vital to find a partner with religious and moral values that match their own.

I turn now to the existing literature regarding the emerging Muslim cyberspace and its increasing role in the marriage process for some Muslims. Very little has been written about Muslim online matrimonial sites. The literature I have located has primarily focused either on Muslims in America, or on the use of online matrimonial sites by Hindus in India. There is clearly a gap in the field as the use of online matrimonial sites in Britain specifically is under-researched, though I find that the existing academic research is still useful for comparative purposes. Bunt states that “the Internet has a profound contemporary impact on how Muslims perceive Islam and how Islamic societies and networks are evolving and shifting in the twenty-first century”.³² He argues that certain parts of the Internet today have a “specific Islamic identity”, including “intentionally

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 414.

²⁹ J. Barraket and M.S. Henry-Waring, “Getting it on(line): Sociological perspectives on e-dating”, *Journal of Sociology* 44:2 (2008), pp. 149-165. p. 156.

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 157.

³¹ *ibid.* p. 158.

³² G. Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2009), p. 1.

designed Muslim-only zones”, such as matrimonial websites.³³ According to Bunt, the emerging Muslim cyberspace suggests a “fusion of traditional and contemporary outlooks”,³⁴ which is important for this project, as I argue that online matrimonial sites represent a synthesis of traditional Islamic principles with modern Western methods. Bunt appears to agree with this view, stating:

Inherent cultural-religious concepts associated with male-female relationships - including *pardah*, engagement, and betrothal - are challenged, adjusted, and compensated by technology. They retain an implicit, familiar, deep-rooted Islamic core.³⁵

This emphasis on the maintenance of traditional Islamic principles means there is a certain “netiquette”³⁶ that Muslims who use these sites are expected to adhere to; Islam makes clear that only certain forms of contact between unmarried men and women are permitted or acceptable, and these rules have been adapted to apply to digital contact. Larsson explains that “the ‘*ulama*’ are concerned about the impact of new information and communication technologies”, particularly in terms of male/female contact.³⁷ Islamic scholars emphasise that the same rules still apply in a digital context, for example, Muzammil Siddiqi, the former president of the Islamic Society of North America gave the following *fatwa* regarding chatting online:

Internet chat is very similar to writing letters or talking to someone on the phone. Actually it is a combination of both. Muslims have to observe the same rules as they observe in writing letters or making telephone calls. Islam does not permit love letters or intimate conversations between males and females who are not married to each other.³⁸

Zwick and Chelariu’s research echoes these views. They conducted a study analysing the use of the *hijab* in matchmaking websites for Shia Muslims in North America. Like Barraket and Henry-Waring, they found that Muslims in Shia communities, specifically in their twenties, were using the Internet more frequently in order to find a partner as they are “either no longer able to easily locate and meet partners for marriage within their own population or sometimes prefer to find them outside the community”.³⁹ Like Larsson, Zwick and Chelariu explained that given the strict

³³ *ibid.* p. 7.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 10.

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 104.

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 106.

³⁷ G. Larsson, *Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates*, (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 133.

³⁸ M. Siddiqi, quoted by Larsson, *ibid.* p. 133.

³⁹ D. Zwick and C. Chelariu, “Mobilizing the *Hijab*: Islamic identity negotiation in the context of a matchmaking website”, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 5 (2006), pp. 380-395, p. 380.

rules within Shia communities regarding appropriate interaction and relationships between men and women, “online matchmaking sites must be able to produce a generally acceptable environment for socializing that honors the community’s cultural and religious statutes and norms”.⁴⁰

The majority of existing academic research surrounding online matrimonial sites has been conducted in India, and much of this literature focuses either on Hinduism or on how marriage is viewed culturally in India with no reference to religion at all.⁴¹ I found very little research that discussed online matrimonial sites in a European context, though this phenomenon was mentioned briefly in passing in a couple of articles I located. Ouis conducted a qualitative study with young, European Muslims in order to determine whether views on marriage had changed between generations.⁴² She argues that modern communications technologies such as the Internet have been instrumental in facilitating “premarital love relations”.⁴³ Ouis states that “in a strictly gender-separated culture, more and more Muslims are falling in love through the use of mobile phones, but especially through sending emails”.⁴⁴ However, she doesn’t provide any concrete evidence that this is the case and, in fact, her conclusion surprises me given that during the interviews she conducted, she finds firstly that her participants “did not particularly want to put themselves in a situation where they would fall in love with someone” as they thought this was Islamically inappropriate, and secondly, “interviewees often opposed the use of phone calls, text messages and e-mails to conduct love relations, deeming such forms of amatory communication as Islamically improper”.⁴⁵ Ouis does counteract this slightly by stating that “some interviewees argued that it is more ‘Islamic’ to meet on the Internet, as this is not a real meeting and is thus halal”, but she does not adequately address or analyse the two contradictory opinions she received regarding this topic.

Although Ouis herself seems to breeze over what I consider to be quite a pertinent issue, her study does reveal that the development of online matrimonial sites is something that the Muslim community is struggling with in terms of agreement. There is clearly debate between Muslims as to whether it is an Islamically appropriate way to meet a spouse. Ahmad, in her study of the changing

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p. 381.

⁴¹ A.V. Dwivedi, “From Arranged to Online: A Study of Courtship Culture in India”, in I.A. Degim, J. Johnson and T. Fu (eds.), *Online Courtship: Interpersonal Interactions Across Borders*, (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2015), pp. 133-147.

N. Seth and P. Ravi, “Online Matrimonial Sites and the Transformation of Arranged Marriage in India”, in C. Romm-Livermore and K. Setzekorn (eds.), *Social Networking Communities and E-Dating Services: Concepts and Implications*, (London: Information Science Reference, 2009), pp. 329-352.

⁴² P. Ouis, “Muslim Marriage in Europe: Tradition and Modernity”, *Global Dialogue* 9:3 (2007). Accessed via <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=418> (11/06/2016).

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

attitudes of university-educated British Muslim women towards marriage, suggests that this is indeed that case:

One of the key questions here for Muslims engaging in internet matrimonial sites and Islamic scholars who are now regularly holding marriage seminars and workshops is whether ‘free-mixing’ on the internet falls within the notions of what constitutes a ‘halal’ and therefore Islamically sanctioned form of contact between unmarried men and women.⁴⁶

The use of Muslim online matrimonial sites is significantly under-researched in an academic context, however, it is evident that this is a phenomenon that Muslims themselves, in Britain and around the world, are still trying to figure out. There have been a notable number of news articles written about this phenomenon, with headlines including: “Why millions of Muslims are signing up for online dating”,⁴⁷ “Muslims in the UK try a Western approach to matchmaking”,⁴⁸ “Serious Muslim seeks spouse - online”,⁴⁹ and “Devout Pakistanis use Internet to marry”.⁵⁰ I feel that exploring this topic further through an academic lens will promote a better understanding of the British Muslim community and the contemporary challenges they are facing. With this study, I aim to contribute to this discussion and I turn now to an outline of the research design for this project and how I went about conducting my own fieldwork.

Methodology.

In this chapter, I split my research design into five sections: the social theory which underpins my project; the preparations I undertook prior to conducting my fieldwork; collecting the data; data analysis; and finally, reflexivity. When devising this project, I decided to adopt a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism refers to the theory that reality is socially constructed. It argues that society is made up of man-made constructs which are not “real” in and of themselves, and do not exist independently of the value humans assign them. Rather, they exist as a result of social agreement and collectively-held beliefs. Even notions such as the “self” or “identity” are considered to be social constructs, created through reactions and interactions with others.

⁴⁶ F. Ahmad, “Graduating towards marriage? Attitudes towards marriage and relationships among university educated British Muslim women”, *Culture and Religion* 13:2 (2012), pp. 193-210, p. 206.

⁴⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30397272> (Accessed 15/06/2016).

⁴⁸ <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/muslims-in-the-uk-try-a-western-approach-to-matchmaking> (Accessed 15/06/2016).

⁴⁹ <http://europe.newsweek.com/serious-muslim-seeks-spouse-online-131359> (Accessed 15/06/2016).

⁵⁰ <http://www.upi.com/Devout-Pakistanis-use-Internet-to-marry/64351089224404/> (Accessed 15/06/2016).

Berger and Luckmann state that “the sociology of knowledge understands human reality as socially constructed reality”.⁵¹ They define “reality” as “a quality pertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition”, and “knowledge” as “the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics”.⁵² They argue that the reality of everyday life is ordered; here and now; shared with others; taken for granted as reality; customised to our experience of it; and subjective in nature, in that “what is ‘real’ to a Tibetan monk may not be ‘real’ to an American businessman”.⁵³ A key part of their argument is that social order does not exist objectively or independently of human experience - it exists only as a result of human activity:

Both in its genesis (social order is the result of past human activity) and its existence at any instant of time (social order exists only and in so far as human activity continues to produce it) it is a human product.⁵⁴

They also claim that individuals are not members of society as soon as they are born - it is their interactions with others as they grow up that socialises them and creates membership and identity. Identity itself is a social construct, and therefore is only a meaningful concept because of the value an individual ascribes to it. It, too, is formed by social processes, and “once crystallised, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations”.⁵⁵

I have chosen to ground my project in social constructionism because my field of study explores both religion and technology. I argue that religion is clear example of a social construct as, to quote Beckford:

It makes very little sense... to think of religion as an object or a subject that could exist independently of human actors and social institutions. Religion does not ‘do’ anything by itself. It does not have agency. Rather, it is an interpretative category that human beings apply to a wide variety of phenomena, most of which have to do with notions of ultimate meaning or value. The sedimented meanings associated with religion in the course of social life constitute authoritative guides not only to usage of the term but also to social action. The category of ‘religion’ is an abstraction from, or distillation of, these meanings and actions. As such, the

⁵¹ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 210-211.

⁵² *ibid.* p. 13.

⁵³ *ibid.* p. 15.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 70.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 194.

category of religion is subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation. Its meaning must therefore be related to the social contexts in which it is used.⁵⁶

Religion is a social construct, but it is “real” in the sense that it leads to social action, therefore affecting society in a tangible way. I also find social constructionism to be an appropriate theory to apply to a discussion of technology. Seth and Ravi state that according to social constructionist theory, “just as technology is shaped by political, economic, social and technical factors, its use will be shaped by individual and societal influences”.⁵⁷ When conducting a project that analyses how technology such as the Internet is being used, it is necessary to understand the context in which it is functioning. Seth and Ravi also argue that regardless of the function that technology is specifically designed for, ultimately it is the users that shape how it will be used and therefore how it will impact society.⁵⁸ Technology affects society, and vice versa: access to technology will have a noticeable impact on society but depending on what constructs humans assign value and meaning to as a result, this in turn will affect how technology develops and changes.

Given that the topic of online matrimonial site use in Britain specifically has been notably under-researched thus far, the majority of my research has been qualitative in nature, in the form of a number of semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with Muslim women in Cardiff. I opted for the method of interviews because “interviewing is most valuable when we are interested in knowing people’s beliefs, attitudes, values, knowledge, or any other subjective orientations or mental content”.⁵⁹ I felt this method connected well with my theoretical stance of social constructionism given that it would allow me to explore the meaning that participants give to a particular social activity - in this case, using matrimonial websites - as part of the social construction of that activity’s meaning. I also chose a qualitative as opposed to quantitative approach since “the real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue”.⁶⁰

When beginning the research process, I first had to decide what types of interviews I would be conducting. I decided to conduct one-on-one interviews as opposed to focus groups for a number of reasons. Firstly, given that, for some, the topic of finding a partner is quite a personal and potentially sensitive subject, I felt there might be some women who might feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences in a group environment, either with strangers or women they had met

⁵⁶ J.A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 4.

⁵⁷ Seth and Ravi, “Online Matrimonial Sites”, p. 331.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 332.

⁵⁹ R.L. Gorden, *Interviewing: strategy, techniques, and tactics*, (London: The Dorsey Press, 1975), p. 39.

⁶⁰ G. Gaskell, “Individual and Group Interviewing”, in M.W. Bauer and G. Gaskell (eds.) *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*, (London: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 38-56, p. 41.

before, and I wanted to ensure that responses would be as honest and detailed as possible. Secondly, as previously mentioned, there is debate within the Muslim community as to how Islamically permissible online matrimonial sites are. Prior to conducting this research, I did not know the extent to which Muslims in Cardiff specifically considered this technology halal or haram, and I felt that in a group environment, some women might feel pressured to answer my questions from a traditional Islamic perspective to avoid judgement from others within the community. Finally, to quote Davies, “one possible group response is to create consensus, to the extent that individuals refrain from saying things they might say in a one-to-one interview”.⁶¹ After these considerations, I felt the findings would be more honest, reliable and valid if I spoke to Muslim women in a one-to-one situation as opposed to group interviews. Of course, my own position as an academic researcher and a non-Muslim woman can also have a bearing on their responses, and I discuss this later in the chapter.

The next stage was to choose between structured or non-structured interviews. I decided to take the middle road and carry out semi-structured interviews:

Here the interviewer asks major questions the same way each time, but is free to alter their sequence and probe for more information in their own words. The interviewer can thus adapt the research instrument to the respondent’s level of comprehension and articulacy.⁶²

This would allow me to ask further questions that I had not originally thought of depending on the answers given by the participants, or to develop themes that emerged that were relevant and interesting. Gorden claims that “interviewing has two basically different functions - discovery and measurement” - and that while a scheduled interview is more appropriate for measurement, a semi-scheduled interview is “more effective for discovery”.⁶³ Since the aim of my qualitative research was to discover and explore Muslim women’s opinions and experiences regarding online matrimonial sites, this type of interview seemed the most appropriate for my research project. Having chosen my methods, I turned next to devising a provisional, flexible interview schedule based on the gaps I had located in the existing academic literature. According to Fielding and Thomas, “questioning should be as open-ended as possible, in order to gain spontaneous information rather than rehearsed positions”, and “questioning techniques should encourage respondents to communicate underlying attitudes, beliefs and values, rather than glib or easy

⁶¹ C.A. Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 105.

⁶² N. Fielding and H. Thomas, “Qualitative Interviewing” in N. Gilbert and P. Stoneman (eds.) *Researching Social Life*, 4th edition, (London: Sage Publishing, 2016), pp. 281-300, p. 282.

⁶³ Gorden, *Interviewing*, p. 80.

answers”.⁶⁴ With this advice in mind, I ensured my interview schedule involved open questions that would provoke detailed responses, and tried to word them in a way that would allow my participants to divulge their honest beliefs.

Locating participants to take part in my project turned out to be the most difficult part of the research process. During the last year, I have spent time volunteering at the local mosque, and so I began by contacting the women I had met there asking if they or anyone they knew would be willing to take part. One of the women I had met directly was willing to take part, however, the other women I knew personally had not used these sites - or did not admit to using these websites - and so they passed my contact details and the details of my project onto various women's groups they were part of in the local community. After the contacts send out my details to approximately fifty women in the community, I had only three responses from women who said they were willing to participate, which made me question either the numbers of members claimed by the websites or whether there was a sense of embarrassment surrounding the use of these websites. I found a final participant at a networking event, who, after asking me about my research, admitted to having used various matrimonial websites and apps herself. Having located five willing participants, I then began to conduct my interviews.

Gorden states that “the interviewer's participation takes the form of determining the setting or social context in which the interview takes place”,⁶⁵ and location appeared to be an important factor when organising my interviews with some of my participants. Because we had not met in person before, two of the women asked to meet in a public place - I met one in a local coffee shop and the other in the women's classroom in a local mosque. The woman I met at the networking event did not live locally and so that interview was conducted over Skype. The woman I knew previously from my volunteer work in the mosque also asked to meet at a coffee shop, although this was for social rather than safety reasons. Finally, one of the women I interviewed before asked to be interviewed at her home rather than in a public place - she emphasised especially not the mosque - as she felt embarrassed and uncomfortable talking about this particular topic in public, furthering my view that there may be a stigma attached to using these websites in the Muslim community in Cardiff.

On meeting with my participants, I ensured the avoidance of any ethical issues by providing them with a project summary/information sheet which explained my research topic and how their responses would be used; emphasised that all the information they gave me would remain anonymous in the project; stated that if there were any questions they felt uncomfortable answering

⁶⁴ Fielding and Thomas, “Qualitative Interviewing”, p. 284.

⁶⁵ Gorden, *Interviewing*, p. 33.

then they were not obliged to do so; explained that the interview would be audio-recorded; and finally, declaring that they could withdraw from the project at any time during or after the interview without having to give a reason. After allowing them to read this information and ask any questions, I asked each participant to sign an ethical consent form in order to ensure they understood everything they had read and I had their full permission to use their responses in this dissertation - a copy of this form can be found in Appendix A.

During the interview process, I ensured that I was not just paying attention to the verbal responses but also to the manner in which my participants were expressing their opinions. To quote Gorden:

The interviewer must listen to *how* the respondent says what he does. Auditory clues include changes in pace, pitch, intensity, and volume level. In addition, there are visual clues such as facial expression, gestures, bodily position, and movements of the hands, feet, and head.⁶⁶

By noting down the changes in the motions listed above, I was able to analyse when a participant was, for example, particularly passionate about a certain opinion or uncomfortable with the line of questioning. I also tried to keep my own tone of voice, body movements and reactions to responses as neutral as possible in order to avoid influencing my participants, and therefore affecting the validity of my findings, in any significant way. Gorden warns that:

Interviewers can bias responses by the tone of voice used in asking the question, by gestures, and by facial expression as well as by deviating from the required wording of the question or structuring the answers.⁶⁷

I therefore made a conscious effort to keep my own opinions on the topic concealed so as to avoid distorting the information I had gathered during my fieldwork. That being said, it was necessary at times to change the wording of certain questions depending on the participant. For example, one respondent's first language was not English, so I needed to frame my questions in a way that I was sure she would comprehend:

In wording the question itself, the interviewer should try to use a vocabulary which is clearly understood by the respondent, which aids in establishing an optimum relationship, and which does not unintentionally load the question in favour of a particular response".⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Gorden, *Interviewing*, p. 96.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* p. 151.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 364.

For ethical reasons, I needed to take extra care to ensure that this participant understood what the project was about and what her involvement would entail. As well as giving her a project summary and information sheet - see Appendix B - I verbally explained the purpose of the interview and asked if she had any questions. She seemed a little suspicious when asked to sign the ethical consent form and she asked why the interview needed to be audio recorded. I assured her that the recording would only be heard by me for transcription purposes, and also said that if she preferred, I could just take hand-written notes instead. Reassured, she allowed the interview to be recorded.

After conducting my fieldwork, the next stage of the research process was to analyse the data I had gathered. In order to do this, I first had to transcribe the audio-recordings of my interviews. I decided to transcribe everything the respondent had said in each interview - verbatim transcription - as opposed to transcribing selectively. There were two reasons behind this decision: firstly, “verbatim transcription means you have not lost any data that may later become significant”, and secondly, this type of transcription will “help guide your analysis and probably reveal themes you had not thought of” prior to or during the interview.⁶⁹ The second reason is particularly important in my own project, as during the transcription process I noticed a number of interesting comments that my participants had made that I hadn’t picked up on and probed further during the interviews - this is something that in future research projects I would hope to improve on. When transcribing my data, I also made sure to heed the advice of Davies:

If in analysing interviews the ethnographer concentrates solely on the content - what is said - then they may miss important communications. Apparently meaningless phrases, repetitions, sublinguistic verbalisations, passes and silences may all be significant in adding, sometimes even contradicting, the pure semantic content of what is said.⁷⁰

Having transcribed my interviews, I turned next to coding the data, which involved organising the data I had collected into various categories and themes in order to make comparisons between the opinions and experiences of my participants. My data analysis process took a “coding up” approach - the aim was to “describe data in order to generate theory”.⁷¹ The categories and themes I highlighted came out of/resulted from the data I had collected, as opposed to deriving the categories from a theoretical framework and attempting to make the data fit those categories in order to test a hypothesis I had come up with at the outset of my project - this would have been

⁶⁹ Fielding and Thomas, “Qualitative Interviewing”, pp. 290-291.

⁷⁰ Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, p. 114.

⁷¹ J. Fielding, “Coding and Managing Data” in Gilbert and Stoneman (eds.) *Researching Social Life*, pp. 359-388, p. 369.

“coding down”.⁷² A “coding up” approach is often linked to Grounded Theory. Hammersley and Atkinson state that:

to one degree or another, the analysis of data feeds into research design and data collection. This iterative process is central to the ‘grounded theorizing’ promoted by Glaser and Strauss, in which theory is developed out of data analysis, and subsequent data collection is guided strategically by the emergent theory.⁷³

Before turning to my findings, a discussion is needed on the effects of reflexivity and positionality on this project. Reflexivity refers to the notion that “all scholarship has an autobiographical aspect”,⁷⁴ and so a researcher, particularly when conducting qualitative research, can never be fully objective, meaning they will in some way influence the outcome of their project. The adoption of a reflexive stance is becoming increasingly important in academic research, and this can be achieved by a recognition of “one’s own situatedness within the research”; “a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation” of positionality; and “active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome”.⁷⁵ The main reflexive issue I faced during this project was what McCutcheon describes as the insider/outsider problem:

the problem is whether, and to what extent, somebody can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another. In other words, to what degree, if any, are the motives and meanings of human behaviors and beliefs accessible to the researcher who may not necessarily share these beliefs and who does not necessarily participate in these practices?⁷⁶

What affects would my non-Muslim researcher status have on the project I was conducting? As an “outsider” to the religion, would the answers I was looking for be accessible to me? I argue that while the insider/outsider problem does indeed pose challenges to research, it is nonetheless possible to collect relevant and valuable data, even from an “outsider” position. This problem does, however, affect all aspects of the research process, and it is important to acknowledge that impact my own position and presuppositions may have on the findings of my research. For example, at the

⁷² *ibid.* p. 369.

⁷³ M. Hammersley and P. Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 205.

⁷⁴ R.T. McCutcheon, (ed.) *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 9.

⁷⁵ R. Berger, “Now I see it, now I don’t: researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research”, *Qualitative Research* 15:2 (2015), pp. 219-234, p. 220.

⁷⁶ McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem*, p. 2.

very outset of the project, I assumed that I would be positioned as an “outsider” by Muslim men because of my gender, and so I decided to focus on the experiences of women, a decision that clearly would play a distinct role in the conclusions I make at the end of my research. McCutcheon explains that “our choice of question shapes the answer we will receive, interviewing just the men [or in this case, women] of a society will tell us as much about a researcher’s presuppositions and biases regarding who counts in a society as it tells us about the society under question”.⁷⁷

How a researcher is positioned by those they are trying to gain access to can be related to a number of personal characteristics - such as age, race, gender, religious belief, etc. - and ultimately this positionality decides whether they are considered to be an “insider” or an “outsider”. In my own project, at various stages I was positioned simultaneously as both an “insider” and an “outsider”. Given that I was researching the experiences of women specifically, my gender allowed me initial access to the women at the local mosque as an “insider” in that sense. However, locating participants was difficult due to my “outsider” status in terms on being a non-Muslim. Initially some of my participants were quite suspicious about why I wanted to speak to them, and my “outsider” status meant it took longer to gain their trust. Interestingly, although my “outsider” position seemed to hinder the early stages of the research process, it seemed to work in my favour during the interviews themselves. A number of women commented on how their Muslim friends and women in their community didn’t speak openly about trying to find a partner, and how it was easier to speak to a stranger about this topic. In her study on the educational experiences of Muslim girls, Haw was also simultaneously positioned as both an “insider” and an “outsider”: “I was involved in several different types of relationships and was perceived in different ways by all of that participants so that what we talked about was governed by this”.⁷⁸ By the students, she was positioned as a “confidante” and a “non-threatening outsider”, she was treated with respect by the fathers given her status as an academic, and she had informal relationships with the mothers given their common experiences as women.⁷⁹

My “outsider” status also allowed me to ask questions that were potentially politically and doctrinally challenging, and to bring up topics that my participants may not have considered before. If I were an “insider”, opinions on certain topics may have been taken for granted and so I might not have asked the same questions. To quote Sands et. al., “interviews by outsiders have the advantage of bringing to the surface taken-for-granted meanings, which tend to be assumed and thus glossed

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 10.

⁷⁸ K.F. Haw, “Exploring the Educational Experiences of Muslim Girls: tales told to tourists - should the white researcher stay at home?”, *British Educational Research Journal* 22:3 (1996), pp. 319-330, p. 328.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* p. 328.

over when the interviewer and interviewee are from the same culture”.⁸⁰ My role as researcher in the findings of this project cannot be over-emphasised. My participants might not have ever considered their own thoughts on some topics until I raised the questions, for example the halal/haram dynamic of online matrimonial sites, and so to quote Steier, it is vital to recognise that “what I describe in my research is in no way existent apart from my involvement - it is not ‘out there’”.⁸¹ I turn now to the results of these interviews, and the findings of my research project.

Findings.

For this research project, I interviewed five women who lived in Cardiff, who varied in age, ethnicity, profession and marital status. Participant A was thirty years old, married, unemployed and described her ethnicity as half Senegalese and half Swedish. Participant B was a thirty-four year old divorcee who was an entrepreneur and described her ethnicity as Bengali. Participant C was a twenty-two year old postgraduate student who was single and described her ethnicity as half Libyan and half British. Participant D was a thirty-nine year old married student, who described her ethnicity as Arabic. Finally, Participant E was a forty-four year old divorcee who was in postgraduate study and described her ethnicity as Welsh. Despite their differing backgrounds, during the interviews a number of common themes emerged, though opinions on some of these topics varied greatly between participants.

I began my interviews by asking at what age the participants had first signed up for a matrimonial site. Interestingly, all five women had first signed up in their twenties - A was twenty six; B was twenty four; C was twenty one; D was “mid twenties”; and E was twenty six. They did not all agree, however, that this necessarily meant that these websites were most popular among younger as opposed to older women. When asked, “do you think this method is more popular with older or younger women?”, participants B, C, D and E all answered that they thought there was no connection with age, and that a variety of women used it. Participant E stated that:

I think everybody uses it. I think everybody who is looking to get married uses it. But the difference is that the older women tend to already be married. They’ve been married younger. And if they’ve managed to still keep married, then obviously it’s not something that would come into their lives. But I think if they’re looking to get married, they will look. Definitely, you know, they’ll go on these sites, like me, and see what’s out there.

⁸⁰ R.G. Sands, J. Bourjolly and D. Roer-Strier, “Crossing Cultural Barriers in Research Interviewing”, *Qualitative Social Work* 6:3 (2007), pp. 353-372, p. 355.

⁸¹ F. Steier, (ed.) *Research and Reflexivity*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), p. 1.

She believed that if there were a higher number of younger women, it was nothing to do with attitudes towards technology or because older women would dismiss this method, it was just because women over a certain age tended to already be married. On the other hand, participant A answered that it would definitely be more popular with younger women. When probed as to why, she responded:

Just because of the change of mentality. Because older women, they may be afraid of the stigma, what the family might think. But the younger women, they're more, you know, open-minded. And they know more about Islam, so they wouldn't necessarily just follow the culture. They would think, oh it doesn't matter, this is a good way to find someone. And it doesn't matter what older people say.

The idea that there was a certain "stigma" attached to the use of these websites within the Muslim community came up across all of my interviews. Participant A expanded on this further, stating:

I think there's a stigma with online. Like maybe it doesn't seem serious enough, because they are looking by themselves, not their parents or someone in the family. Maybe that's why... Even my husband at the beginning, he would tell me, 'oh no, don't say to the wider family in Morocco that that's how we found each other'.

Participant C agreed, saying "people will probably think badly of them, like, oh why can't you meet someone in real life, like in the 3D world?". Participant E similarly argued that online matrimonial sites are quite a taboo subject, and that the stigma attached leads to judgment from others in the community, meaning it's not a topic that is usually openly discussed:

I think it's fear of being judged. I think, you know, although it shouldn't be like this, but a lot of Muslims will talk to non-Muslims more openly because they don't feel like they'll be judged for something that they're doing, whereas they feel like another Muslim will judge them and think you shouldn't be doing that, that's haram.

Participant B disagreed somewhat, and said that it was not just the discussion of online matrimonial sites that was avoided within the community, but the discussion of trying to find a husband in general was usually avoided:

It's not even just being on a marriage site. Generally looking for a husband, I wouldn't go around telling people, oh yeah, I'm looking for a man. It's not something you go around talking

about anyway, like oh yeah, I'm single, I need a man. We just don't. Like people know you're single or you're not. But how you're going to go out there looking for your husband is not something we discuss if that makes sense. It's not a conversation I'd have over a cup of tea! Oh I'm on a marriage site! It's not one of those things we discuss openly.

It was interesting that Participant E brought up the halal/haram dynamic as this was one of the aspects of this research topic that I most wanted to discuss. During my first interview, I made the mistake of assuming that the participants thought that online matrimonial sites were Islamically permissible - they all described themselves as practicing Muslims and had all used them at some point and so I made this assumption. When I asked participant A what aspects of the site she had used convinced her that it was halal, she responded, after a long pause:

How? I'm not sure! They ask how religious the person is, so in your profile you have to say how religious you are, if you pray, if you wear the hijab, so there are some indicators, but other than that, I don't really know.

After hearing this response, I realised my mistake, and so in my following interviews, I decided to change the wording of the question to "do you think online matrimonial sites are an Islamically permissible way to find a partner?" instead. When asked this question, the remaining four participants all gave very different responses. Participant C stated that it was definitely a halal method of finding a partner:

Yeah because on most sites there's an option where you can put in your Wali, your guardian's details, and they get a transcript of every conversation you've had sent to them each week. Yeah, so even if you're stricter, and you don't want to talk to a member of the opposite sex without someone else being there, you can have that option.

Participant B stated that these sites were "fifty fifty":

Islamically, is it right or wrong? Yes, if you're going to be talking to a man without a third person there then you're maharam, then yes it is wrong and obviously you don't know what conversations, where they're going to go or what they lead to. Things go a bit further on where it shouldn't go. That part of it is wrong but if you know your boundaries or where you need to discuss or what you need to speak about, like if I thought I like this person I've spoken to a couple of times, I would involve my parents, and that's where it's okay... But Islamically it's a borderline. It's a very fine line about whether you want to be speaking to a man without someone being there.

Like participant C, B also mentioned matrimonial sites that could involve a third person, which made them more permissible in her opinion:

I think it's how you deal with it personally. Because I think there was a marriage site out there that I did register with who has a third person online who actually sees what messages you're sending, and what he's sending and what's being discussed. Even if you swap numbers they will ask you, you know, are you sure you should be doing this? So they're very strict, and I would recommend that site because there's always a third person watching over what you're saying to each other which I think is fantastic.

The idea that the halal/haram dynamic was more to do with the intentions and actions of the Muslim women using it, rather than the site itself, was also brought up in the response of participant E. When asked her opinion, she stated:

I think it depends on how the people use them. I think that essentially it's just a database of people and there's nothing wrong with that. It's no different to going through what they call the Rishta Aunties who have basically heaps of CVs of eligible men and women. I don't think it's any different from that, it's just the same thing for the twenty-first century really. So I think on the surface, yes it's Islamically permissible. But I think it's down to the people who use them... the websites in and of themselves are fine.

Participant D, however, had a vastly opposing view. Her experience of using matrimonial websites was not in order to find a partner, she said that she just made a profile out of curiosity, in order to see how they worked. When asked whether or not she thought they were halal, she stated that they were not the right method to use, arguing: "what we know as Muslim women [is that] we don't run after marriage. The man comes to you". The question of the woman's role in the pursuit of marriage arose during a number of my other interviews, although participant D was the only interviewee who held the view that only a man should instigate the process; all of the other participants stated that, at least through matrimonial sites, they were happy to begin the conversations. Participant E implied that the internet gave her more confidence, and when asked whether or not she would instigate contact with potential partners online, she answered:

This website that I'm on now, there hasn't been anybody that I would be interested in, but if there were, I would initiate, yeah, I would initiate. I'm not the type to sit back, which is kind of funny because in real life I wouldn't be. But you know, you've got that kind of veil of the internet so I would be. I think in real life if I saw somebody that I was interested in I would ask

people to do it for me, sort of just to avoid the embarrassment, but because there's a level of anonymity there, then you know, I would.

Participant B also stated that she would be happy to instigate conversations with men online, but she wouldn't act the same way in "real life"; however, she justified this in terms of "modesty" rather than "embarrassment". In reference to instigating contact online, she stated, "I contact them. If I like someone I'll just ask, 'hello, how are you?' Yeah I always start it off, I'm not shy about that". When asked whether or not she would approach a potential partner the same way in "real life", she responded:

No, I don't think I would actually, no. I think you are hiding behind a screen, aren't you? They don't know what I look like, they don't know who I am, so the confidence is there. But in person, it's not about the confidence. I wouldn't even put myself in that situation as a Muslim woman, approaching a man, that's wrong in itself. So, no I wouldn't in person at all, no.

Participant D's view that "the man comes to you" was criticised by other interviewees as a cultural rather than religious issue. Participant E stated:

I think if women are using it [matrimonial sites] they're sort of seen as being a bit forward. There is still this sort of weird post-colonial mentality amongst a lot of Muslims that it's the guy that should be doing the pursuing but the girl shouldn't be actively looking for a man. Or it should be her dad or her brothers who are looking on her behalf, like she shouldn't be out there giving her opinions. And as far as the religion goes, that's wrong... In some countries it's fine, but I think a lot of, especially South Asian and Arab cultures, it's not the done thing at all. So for a woman to be seen as having put herself on such a website is also seen as a bit too forward. And I think that's also why they're hesitant, because they don't want to be judged as having that lack of morals or that lack of modesty as it were.

Participant A agreed that the view that women should play a more passive role in the process of finding a partner had no basis in religious teaching, and that women who appear too forward can be stigmatised by the community:

In Islam, for me, the example of the Prophet's wife, Khadija, she would instigate the proposal for marriage. So in Islam it's something normal, it's just the cultures that have problems... I find it really disappointing. Because loads of cultures, they choose the cultural way instead of the Islamic way. So the women wouldn't ask someone for marriage or even there is a stigma if she does it. Like she's not, you know, a good Muslim or something.

The theme of culture versus religion came up a number of times during my research on this topic, especially in terms of the role played by ethnicity in the process of finding a partner. Participant A stated that the main reason she signed up for a matrimonial website was “because I couldn’t find anyone any other way because basically I’m from a mixed family”. When probed further as to why this was a problem, she responded:

So I’m mixed race, first of all. So there’s an ethnic component in it which makes it more difficult to find someone because usually people, in Cardiff anyway, they tend to look for someone from their own ethnic minorities. Like Arabs look for Arabs, Pakistanis look for Pakistanis. So like me being Senegalese and Swedish, it was really hard to find someone.

Participant C also claimed that ethnicity was the main problem she faced when trying to find a partner, and so was the primary reason she turned to websites and apps. She explained, “I was going out with someone and then they approached their parents and their parents were like, no you can’t go out with her because she’s not the same race”. She also elucidated that this was not the only time she had experienced this attitude:

I’ve been out with other people and they’ve said, oh I don’t know how my parents are going to feel because you’re a white girl. And for me it’s very strange because I’m the child of a mixed race marriage. So I just find it strange that someone could be so closed-minded. But it’s really common and I know people that have been denied marrying other people just because of their race... And in religion, like in religious texts and what not it’s got no basis at all, but some people are just like that because of culture. They just want to, I don’t know, keep things pure.

Although participant E didn’t claim to have faced issues finding a spouse because of her own ethnicity, in her responses, she did acknowledge nonetheless that it was a problem within the Muslim community: “with the Asian community and even the Arab community it’s very much the done thing to marry within your ethnicity. And especially with the South Asians, especially with the Pakistanis, they’re supposed to marry from back home and to bring that person over”.

On top of ethnicity, the tension between religious and cultural views was also discussed by my interviewees in relation to divorce. Participant B stated that, “I am frowned upon right now in the community because I’m a divorcee. It shouldn’t be that way, but it is. It’s a cultural thing, not religion”. It was clear by the amount of times she referred to her status as a divorcee throughout the interview that this was an important reason as to why she had chosen to look for a spouse online as opposed to other methods. She implied that these websites were especially common for divorcees,

and it was perhaps a better method to use rather than more traditional methods for finding another partner, as it avoided the stigma she felt as a divorced woman in the Muslim community:

I found a lot of divorced men on there. I think it is something, I should say 'people like us', that's like putting us into a sect isn't it? But because I've been divorced twice, it's not something I would go out there and say, 'oh well, I'm looking for a husband'. And having to mention I've been divorced twice in public or in person or, you know, in the community, I wouldn't do it. With online, it's easier because then you find a lot of people who are related to you. You can search for them. So I think it's easier. I think you would probably find more older, divorced people on there than single.

Participant E agreed that matrimonial sites were especially useful for divorced women. She stated that being divorced meant she knew exactly what she wanted, and more importantly didn't want, from her next relationship, but that these wants were not necessarily understood by her guardian. She implied that matrimonial sites allowed women to reverse traditional roles, so that they could refer potential suitors to their guardian, rather than the other way around:

I know for a fact that generally in the community, people don't tend to think of divorced women as being the first choice... I do have somebody who's said that he would act as my wali, my guardian in terms of marriage but then he and I have had disagreements over what's best... So I'm a bit concerned with my wali, who once said, 'oh, you know, we've got lots of men who come into the mosque looking for sisters to marry and I never think to recommend you because I don't think they're suitable'. And I'm like, well shouldn't I decide that? And so this is another thing that I like about these websites is that I'm the one who decides whether I think someone might be suitable before I refer them... And I think as someone who's more mature and who's had experience, who's been divorced, I know definitely what I don't want... So I think especially for divorced women or widows it's an essential service because it gives us that outlet to go and look for that without actually going out and, you know, chatting up men!

Many of my participants thought that these sites were especially helpful for women who tended to be overlooked in the community in terms of marriage, for example, divorcees. This also applied to converts or new Muslims. Participant D suggested that "some people find it's good for them because maybe they are new Muslims and maybe there are no mosques in the area so they try to find someone through this website". Even if there are mosques in the community, many converts do not have Muslim family, so it is more difficult to find a spouse through traditional methods. This was the case for participant E, who first signed up for a matrimonial site as a recent convert to Islam:

Initially, in my twenties when I signed up for one, it was simply because I didn't know what was the done thing... Because I was newly Muslim, I didn't have anybody who was speaking up for me, so to speak, nobody to represent me who was a member of the community. You know, everybody else sort of had their dad or their brother who everybody knows, and they'll know that, oh that person's got a sister and we like that person so let's see what his sister is like, whereas converts don't have that. So it was a resource that I had heard of.

That being said, it was also clear from my interviews that these websites were not only popular with converts and divorcees - the women I spoke to all felt that single women from a vast range of backgrounds and experience used this resource. When asked why they thought these websites were becoming so popular with women of all ages and backgrounds in the Muslim community, a number of my respondents suggested that there was a desire for more freedom and independence, and that although the opinions of parents and family were still valued, women wanted to have more control in the selection process when it comes to finding a spouse. Participant A stated:

I think it's really useful [matrimonial sites] and it's a good way to find someone, not necessarily through family because they have a certain perspective of who they want as a partner for their children, but maybe the children don't want those kinds of people. So you have to be quite open-minded and look for a different sort of people. You have to know yourself who you want.

Participant C echoed the opinion that the views on who would make a suitable partner might differ between generations:

I think that when you're on an app it's like you read the profile and see if you're attracted to them before, or if you like their qualities before your parents. Whereas your parents could weed out someone that could have been the perfect match for you. And I always think that if you're someone, you know, you've been away for university, you're living away from home or you've got a social life, your parents don't necessarily know all the qualities, like know you as well as they'd probably like to think. So this way is better, it gives a woman more freedom when she's sort of deciding for herself and then they can go to the parents and try and make that work.

Like participant C, participant E also brought up the idea that increasing access to education and new experiences may lead to tensions between the values of parents and children, hence the growing popularity of matrimonial websites amongst Muslim women:

I think that going on these websites, it is literally a matter of ticking a few boxes and writing a few sentences, You can make it known what you want as opposed to relying on your dad or your brothers, what they think you want or what they think is best for you, which could be the opposite of what you want. So I definitely think it's empowering in that respect... I also think it's to do with mobility. More and more young people are getting educated, they won't necessarily go to university at home, so they've been out and lived away from their parents, they've seen the world a bit. They've come to possibly a different identity that their parents have. They probably feel more British and less Pakistani or Bangladeshi or Jordanian or whatever. And so they've decided that they don't necessarily want somebody from the same ethnic background but with the same values in terms of their British identity. So there are more young people who would like to have so-called mixed marriages, and it's [matrimonial sites] one way for them to go about it. Because if their parents approve, which is one hurdle, and their parents don't mind it, don't oppose it, they just simply won't have the social networks to find such a partner for the kids.

Participant E implies that matrimonial sites are not just empowering, but they also fulfil a practical function. If a woman has developed cultural values that differ greatly from those of her parents, and so her parents are unable to find someone suitable from their existing connections, matrimonial sites provide a way for the woman to expand her search whilst still keeping her family involved. Participant E also suggests that matrimonial websites allow more freedom to Muslim women who are now choosing to get married later in life than is traditionally expected:

Plus I think also, a lot of women especially, because they're becoming professionals more, having more education, more careers, they're marrying later than they would have. And of course we've sort of got an issue where it's like the women will want to marry older, and the guys, when they want to get married, they won't want to marry someone the same age as them, they'll want somebody younger. So you've got, say, twenty six or twenty seven year old women who are suddenly seen as un-marry-able because they're too old, which I laugh at! So I think it [matrimonial sites] helps them definitely. So I think that's another reason why it's becoming more popular because there's this sort of generation of women who are older than they used to be wanting to get married and they're struggling.

Participant D disagreed with the other responses that indicated matrimonial sites allow women more independence in the marriage process. Instead, she argued that the use of matrimonial sites offered the same amount of freedom to women as traditional methods of finding a spouse:

To be honest, yeah she has freedom because she sees more than a hundred or two hundred men in the list on these sites and she can pick. But it is not the right thing. I think people think that online you will have more freedom but it's the same with traditional ways. Go to the mosque, you can ask if there is anyone available looking to get married and you can look around and choose. There is still freedom in this method because even if people do it the official way for getting married, you can sit with each other and see if you are suitable or not. It doesn't mean that you have to get married.

Participant D discouraged the use of these websites, insisting that it was Islamically better for Muslim women to use the community and the mosque to find husbands - to use "traditional" methods. Interestingly, participant E argued that matrimonial sites are actually still "traditional" in a sense. She suggested that the traditional norms and values still applied using this method, and in many ways, it was no different inherently to the process that participant D described as the "traditional", "official" and "correct" way of getting married:

I don't think that using the website is necessarily not doing the traditional method, in the way that, how can I say it? Like, for me, the non-traditional way would be that you date somebody for a time, or you meet someone through your work or through your schooling or something like that, and so you know them for a long time before actually getting married. That for me would be non-traditional. I don't think going through these websites is necessarily non-traditional in that sense. You're still looking for somebody for that purpose, for the purpose of marrying, not for anything else. You're looking for a partner, so I don't think it's different in that sense. And obviously if I were to meet somebody even through a website, I wouldn't necessarily talk to them directly, I would send them through my wali first to vet them. So they'd still go through the same procedure: I would need to hear about them from people who knew their character, I'd still need to know their background. So it's still traditional in that sense, that I'd consult a lot of people and I wouldn't necessarily socialise with that person in a casual way without there being a marriage contract in place.

Participant E also thought that it was this maintenance of Islamic values through modern technology that made online matrimonial sites different from online dating in general:

They [general online dating sites] probably use different algorithms than the Islamic ones would... I would imagine when Muslims go on these things they're supposedly looking for marriage, so they're looking for long-term, whereas the non-Muslims aren't necessarily. They might just be looking for, I don't know, somebody to go out and have dinner with, plus whatever, while they're in a particular city. And for them, that's the lifestyle so that's fine. So the websites will be able to match that kind of thing, whereas with Muslims that wouldn't really

be applicable. So I imagine it's different. I imagine it's probably stricter in the sense of having parent involved and things like that.

Participant A agreed, and said that matrimonial sites were different from online dating in general because "the purpose is marriage only". The other three participants, however, disagreed and said there was no real difference between the two. When asked the question, "do you think there's anything that makes these websites different from online dating in general?", participant B paused to consider her response for a few seconds. Her body language, pauses and nervous laughter gave the impression that she had not really considered this before, and she seemed uncomfortable with her own answer:

Do you know what? No, not really is it? No, personally, no I don't think it is. I think it's the same thing! Well no, so with dating, online dating, I've never been on one but I'm sure it goes further into getting and dating and seeing each other and keeping your options open. Yeah, do you know what? If you think about it, you can do that on a marriage site as well can't you? So no, there isn't much of a difference. It's not really a good thing at all is it?

Participant C also said that there was no difference, however, she was not as uncomfortable with this conclusion as participant B. Participant C was the youngest of my interviewees and regularly used apps such as "Minder" and "Musmatch", which have very similar formats to general online dating apps such as "Tinder". Her choice of language throughout the interview was noticeably different to the other respondents, for example, instead of using terms such as "introductions", she referred to going on "dates": "so I signed up for that [Minder], met two people, went on two dates, it didn't really go anywhere". I was aware that her use of the term "date" might differ from my own, and so I probed further as to what she meant by that term. Her response confirmed that she was indeed using the term in the generic sense:

I'm just looking to meet someone and see what they're like. Like the end goal is marriage, but I don't want to get married like, you know, two months after I meet someone. So it was like dates, we just went out and got food.

She also stated that the apps designed for Muslims were no different from online dating apps in general because "you still get weirdos and perverts and people like that. You still just get people who message you disgusting things as you would on Tinder."

Participant C was not the only interviewee to refer to the negative aspects of these websites. Even the participants who had had mostly positive experiences and would recommend the use of

this method to other Muslim women were quick to point out the fact that they were not perfect. Like participant C, participant A stated that there were some men on these websites that did not appear to be serious about marriage:

You may have some dodgy people on there. Like some people only want to get married, you know, to get the nationality, or some people even just want to have some 'fun'. There were some profiles that indicated that they were not really serious. That's a bit weird because with these websites, the purpose is marriage!

Participant A was not the only respondent to bring up the idea that some men were on these sites "to get the nationality". Participant C stated that some matrimonial websites had a reputation as being "mainly 'freshies' or meant that have just come into this country". She explained that within her circle of friends, they avoided certain websites that were known "as a place where men will sign up to find a British citizen wife, not necessarily just to marry them because they love them but to get a visa". Participant D agreed, saying "people who go through these websites [all matrimonial websites] want to marry from international". Although participant C only referred to a few "known" websites as having this problem, participant D condemned all matrimonial sites of having male members who were only interested in gaining citizenship. For participant D, however, a more serious negative aspect to these websites was the ability for men in particular to misrepresent themselves, and she felt that the men who used the internet to find a spouse only did so because there was something about them that left them unable to find a wife through the "right" way:

It [matrimonial sites] is not the right thing. You know why? Because each one writes lies, he speaks lies. The men, they write good things about themselves, we are good, we are humble, we respect women, and then they contradict it. There are good traditional ways. This is the way. Online is not the way, it is a waste of time. I don't think the men write the truth about themselves. If you're a good man, if you're an honest man, why can't you find someone in your community? Why are you looking outside? If he's a good man, why can't he find someone where he is? For example, in Cardiff there are many Muslims and many mosques - why is he looking online? If you are good, go to the mosque, because then you can ask if she is a good girl or not. You can meet her family, her father and speak with him. There are lots of girls, they are everywhere. If you want to get married, you can! So why go through these websites?

Participant B held a similar view. Although she had met a husband online, she would not encourage other women to use this method, especially if they were looking for their first marriage. Instead, she would recommend more traditional routes. When asked whether or not she had had a positive or negative experience, she responded:

Fifty fifty. Positive because I did find myself a husband and we did have a good marriage to a certain degree and to a certain point, but I did get divorced in the end and it is *because* I think I found him on a marriage site. Because there's only so much information you have on a person, so obviously after I married him a lot of things were revealed that I didn't know before. And if I went through family avenues or the community where they can do a background check on the person, I think I could have avoided a lot of things. But because I'd done it myself and there's only so much information on there and there's so much a person can just tell you, I think it's fifty fifty... You can never know their true character online. You can't work that out.

She said that she would probably recommend the stricter websites, but she distinguished between older, divorced women like herself who had had experience and younger women:

I think for young girls, if they're on it, they need to be careful because there's all sorts online, you have to be very careful. So I don't know. I don't think I would personally recommend it. I think it's good to go through family, it's good to go through friends and the community. At least you know who you are dealing with, they know the individual. I think online it's just probably, like me you know, I'm at the end of it all now. I've been divorced twice, I've exercised family and community avenues, this is like my last resort kind of thing. So personally no, I wouldn't recommend it.

After mixed opinions about whether or not this was something my interviewees would recommend to their female friends, I asked how many other people they knew that had used these websites. Participant A only knew of one other person, her twin sister, and she claimed that "we suggest to friends to use it but they don't really want to". Participant C replied, "I don't know any other girls that use them." Participant D also only knew one other woman that had used this method. I found this surprising given the numbers claimed by various websites and apps, though participants B and E suggested that the number of their friends using it might be higher than they knew, but embarrassment prevented some women from admitting to signing up. Participant B stated, "I don't know anybody else actually who uses them! Though it's not something we actually discuss. So there probably is somebody out there who is on it but I've never asked them." Participant E said that although she didn't personally know many people who had used these websites, she thought that the numbers claimed by the sites were probably accurate, and it was just not something that was usually openly discussed among Muslim women:

I think it's more popular than people are willing to admit. Before I met you, I was actually asking some of my friends about it and once one girl admitted that she had they were all like,

well actually I have too! But my question was sort of met with silence until that one brave person said yeah that's how I met my husband... Once somebody says it and sort of the taboo is broken and there's a precedent then they'll come out and admit it.

Discussion.

I turn now to a discussion of the implications and significance of my findings. Firstly, the disagreement between participants about whether or not the use of matrimonial sites was Islamically permissible shows that this social phenomenon is something that many Muslims in Britain are currently struggling with. Participant B stated, "I think it's how you deal with it personally", and similarly, participant E suggested "it depends on how people use them." The idea that it is up to Muslims individually to discern what is Islamically permissible as they gain access to new developments and technologies has been discussed in existing academic literature. Bunt states:

According to contemporary Muslim scholars, especially those who are proactive on the Internet, there is no incompatibility between Islam as a religion and its representation on the Internet. That vision is dependent on the purpose and intent for which the media is applied. This determination of what is Islamically appropriate or correct online is best left to the judgement of the individual Muslim.⁸²

This echoes Ramadan's views, outlined previously in the literature review chapter, that Muslims must individually decide "what they may do in conscience and what they should avoid".⁸³ My findings also corroborate the conclusions made in the studies of Ouis and Ahmad respectively, and confirm that this issue is one that continues to spark debate. When I asked my participants whether or not they thought this method was Islamically permissible, my question was often met with long pauses before I received a response. This implies that it is a question that had perhaps not considered previously, and so although it is clearly a topic of concern, it is not one that is being openly discussed within Muslim communities. Due to the time constraints on this project, it was beyond my scope to examine how religious and cultural leaders are dealing with this issue, but this would be an important step to consider in future research to gain clarity on the matter.

The second significant outcome of my findings is the impact online matrimonial sites have appeared to have on gender roles in the process of finding a spouse. McWilliams and Barrett, in their study of online dating in middle and later life, argue that "online dating may appeal to women as a way to exert more control over the process, compared with traditional methods though which

⁸² Bunt, *iMuslims*, p. 25.

⁸³ Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, p. 96.

they met partners in earlier life”.⁸⁴ They also claim that “women choosing to use online dating websites may be more proactive than others in the search for romantic partners”.⁸⁵ Similarly, Lawson and Leck argue that although “tradition gender norms that dictate that women wait for men to ask them out... are still common today”, nevertheless “some research and responses from interviewees suggest that these norms may not operate online”.⁸⁶ They qualify this, stating “dating online [has] modified gender interactions by allowing women to behave more assertively”.⁸⁷ My findings suggest that these statements are also true when applied to British Muslim women, in the context of using online matrimonial sites as opposed to online dating in general. The notion that traditional gender norms which dictate that women should take a more passive role in the process of finding a spouse are clearly still prevalent within Muslim communities today, as shown through participant D’s statement that “the man comes to you”. However, every other interviewee made clear that, at least in an online context, they were confident in instigating conversations with men and so the social norms and gender roles relating to the marriage process seem to have been altered online. It is important to acknowledge though that the changing confidence and more aggressive role of women on online matrimonial sites has not had a resulting transformative effect on actions or societal norms in “real life”. Participants B and E both admitted that their confidence in instigating contact with potential partners online was at least in part affected by being “hidden behind a screen” and having the protection of “the veil of the internet”, and both stated that in person, they would not approach a man in the same way, either out of embarrassment in the case of participant E, or modesty in the case of participant B.

Another notable implication from my findings is the “essential service” that online matrimonial sites provide for those who may feel overlooked within the Muslim community during the process of finding a spouse, in particular, divorcees and converts. McWilliams and Barrett claimed that “middle-aged and older adults... are likely to have experienced long-term, intimate relationships that affect, in gendered ways, reentry into the dating market. Becoming single, though divorce or widowhood, is an emotionally challenging experience”.⁸⁸ This appeared true for participant B, who stated that she was “frowned upon” within the community because of her status as a divorcee. Her experience certainly affected her “reentry into the dating market”, or more accurately in this case, the marriage market. When deciding to look for a second husband she said, “do I want to go through my parents again? Is the community going to help me? No, I’ll just do this

⁸⁴ McWilliams and Barrett, “Online Dating in Middle and Later Life”, p. 414.

⁸⁵ *ibid.* p. 414.

⁸⁶ H.M. Lawson and K. Leck, “Dynamics of Internet Dating”, *Social Science Computer Review* 24:2 (2006), pp. 189-208, p. 196.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p. 205.

⁸⁸ McWilliams and Barrett, “Online Dating in Middle and Later Life”, p. 413.

on my own". Similarly, participant E felt that "generally in the community, people don't tend to think of divorced women as being the first choice". After their previous relationships and their experiences of divorce, both women were more certain about what they wanted and didn't want from their next marriage, and online matrimonial sites provided them with a way to decide who they thought was suitable before referring them to their parents or guardian.

Matrimonial sites also provide an "essential service" for converts to Islam. Converts are often hindered in the marriage process primarily due to the fact that they lack a Muslim family, and so they do not have anyone known to the community to represent them and who has the necessary social networks to make introductions. The topic of ethnicity arose repeatedly throughout the interviews I conducted, and this is often a further challenge that converts face. My findings show that for some Muslim women in Britain, matrimonial sites offer a practical way to find a partner, and that they can sometimes be used out of necessity, rather than choice. For some women, it may appear to be the only resource available to them, either because they feel stigmatised by the community and therefore are reluctant to attempt more traditional methods, or because they simply lack the connections necessary to have a traditional introduction. Participant E is a good example of how this method works especially for both converts and divorcees. She has had experience with these sites over an eighteen year period, signing up first in her twenties as a new Muslim, and then secondly in her forties as a divorcee.

My findings also highlight the growing inter-generational gap between Muslims in Britain. Ahmad's study into the opinions of university educated British Muslim women regarding marriage revealed that:

While parents tended to prioritise family background, graduate, financial and professional status, daughters, in addition, placed greater emphasis on intellectual compatibility, personality, intelligence, honesty, outlook on life and religious and cultural adherence, and shared understandings.⁸⁹

Similarly, during her research on Muslim marriage in Europe, Ouis' interview participants "responded that ethnicity was more important to their family than to themselves".⁹⁰ The findings of my project corroborate these results, implying that for many young Muslim women in Britain, the success of matrimonial sites may be a consequence of disagreement between generations as to which qualities are most desirable in a potential spouse. In a number of the interviews I conducted, it was suggested that factors such as access to higher education and living away from home resulted

⁸⁹ Ahmad, "Graduating towards marriage?", p. 197.

⁹⁰ Ouis, "Muslim Marriage in Europe".

in children developing a different identity and different values to their parents, and so they were less confident in their parent's ability to choose a partner for them with their own input being limited. Matrimonial sites allow Muslim women to access potential partners that exist outside of their parent's often limited social networks, giving them more freedom and choice in the marriage process. This conclusion also links to the research of Seth and Ravi. In their study on the transformative role of online matrimonial sites in India, they state that "with online services, there is potential for disintermediation of the role played by parents and their status as gatekeepers starts to diminish. The process of screening and matching is no longer solely dependent on parents."⁹¹

That being said, the findings of my research also show that although the role of parents in locating potential partners may have lessened in the cases where online matrimonial sites are used, the role of the family is still crucial in the marriage process overall. Although the use of these websites allows women the freedom to see who is available for themselves, and to perhaps make initial contact, the women I interviewed made it clear that potential spouses would still be referred to their parents or guardians for approval. Matrimonial sites have altered the way in which women can locate eligible men, but they have not fundamentally changed the overall marriage process - once again, the transformative power of the Internet does not extend so far as to affect rudimentary traditions and societal norms. Seth and Ravi's research offers a similar conclusion:

It is not surprising that sometimes the initiative towards matchmaking is now being taken by the prospective partners themselves. Even if they found their own partner, given the dominant role of parents and the strong bond with family, they would still seek the approval of their families. Whether it was the family that acted as a gatekeeper or a final consenting authority, the family is ever present in the matchmaking process.⁹²

Although their study took place in India, it is clear to see from my own findings that the same conclusions are applicable to Muslim women in Britain.

It is also important to acknowledge that my findings show some ambiguity with the term "inter-generational gap". When I use this term, it is a fluid concept; I am not simply referring to younger Muslims versus older Muslims. Participant E was forty-four years old, and was a strong advocate for the use of online matrimonial sites, though she mentioned that there might be some judgement from "the older generation, the aunties, like in their sixties or older". My findings suggest that these websites might in fact be more popular with older women, who had previously been married, rather than younger single women who were looking for their first husband.

⁹¹ Seth and Ravi, "Online Matrimonial Sites", p. 341.

⁹² *ibid.* p. 342.

Therefore, when I refer to an inter-generational gap, I am alluding to the difference in values between the women using the websites, regardless of their age, and the generation above them. These women, however old they are, have developed different identities and placed greater importance on different values, for whatever reason - be it living away from home, greater social mobility, or focusing on careers - and so have come to require qualities in a partner that the generation above them, (those traditionally in charge of locating or at least approving a spouse), may not be able to find through traditional means and existing social networks.

Finally, the responses of participant C raised a number of interesting points. During the interview, she referred to someone she was “going out with” and spoke of going on “dates”, and unless directly asked, did not refer to what Islam traditionally has to say on the questions I asked her. Unlike the other participants, who gave examples such as the Prophet’s wife to explain their opinions, participant C did not back up her responses with religious justifications. When asked if there was any difference between the websites and apps she used and online dating in general, she replied “not really, no”, but didn’t seem uncomfortable with this answer. I felt at times that she perhaps thought that religion was more important *during* a marriage, rather than in the preliminary process of finding a partner which differed greatly from the opinions of the other participants. This highlights a difference between what is perceived as “official” Islam and everyday “lived” Islam for some Muslim women.

Participant C also seemed to hold different opinions about the role of “love” in Islamic marriage to the other participants. She stated that some men only used matrimonial sites in order to get a visa, not to marry someone “because they love them”. She also stated that although the end goal was marriage, “I don’t want to get married, you know, two months after I meet someone”. I felt that perhaps these two statements were related - she wanted to marry for love, and that probably wouldn’t happen in a short period of time. These statements were very different to the other responses I received. Participant A was married within a few months of meeting her husband online, and participant B, when she met her second husband through a matrimonial site, was also married within ten months: “I registered in January and I was married by October, so within ten months I got married”. Participant B also stated that in Islam, “God blesses you with love after your marriage - it doesn’t exist before”. These findings led me to consider that there may be a link between a Muslim woman’s view on the role of love and how she goes about finding a spouse. Participant C implied that love should be a prerequisite for marriage, and so she did not seem to have an issue with dating as a way to find out more about a potential partner until she was willing to make a substantial commitment. Participant B, on the other hand, held the religious view that love comes after marriage, and so the marriage process was quicker; compatibility and shared values, as

with most arranged marriages, seemed to be the most important factors to consider, and romantic love has the potential to grow during the marriage.

Conclusion.

The increasing use of online matrimonial sites reveals much about British Muslim women today. Scholars have suggested that the Internet is providing a new social arena for Muslim women and women in general, and the participants I spoke to during this project seem to agree that the Internet is indeed creating an empowering space. These websites are allowing women more freedom, choice and independence in the process of finding a spouse. The increasing popularity of this method shows a clear shift in gender roles, from women being traditionally more passive to becoming more assertive, at least in an online context. The use of online matrimonial sites has not, however, had a significant impact on gender roles in “real life”, and most of the etiquette and Islamic values that apply in “real life” are maintained in the online world. The use of online matrimonial sites also shows that British Muslim women today are developing different identities to members of the previous generation, and there is a shift away from the cultural values held by earlier generations to a more “British” identity. Matrimonial sites are also offering Muslim women who struggle with traditional methods of finding a partner a modern alternative. Divorcees who feel they are overlooked or stigmatised by the community, and converts who lack the necessary social networks for a traditional arranged marriage now have a new avenue in which to begin the process independently, although ultimately the family or community is involved in approving their choices. Finally, the success of online matrimonial sites does not necessarily mean that British Muslim women consider them a halal method of finding a spouse. If anything, my research has shown that there is still much debate within Muslim communities as to how Islamically permissible these websites are. I have attempted to show that this project contributes to the field through further exploration of the changing roles of women within the Muslim community in Britain; the challenges British Muslims face as they gain access to new developments and technologies; and the growing inter-generational gap.

The topic of the use of online matrimonial sites by the Muslims in Britain specifically is significant under-researched, and so there is much potential for further research in this field and there are a number of ways in which other researchers could build on the findings of this project. My findings are constrained by the size of the sample and so the potential for generalisation is limited; nonetheless, the responses I received have generated several valuable questions which merit further study. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the studied population, it will take more time to build relationships and recruit a larger sample. Enlarging the

sample to capture a wider range of participants, as well as a chance to test for frequency of experiences, would significantly enrich our understanding. As well as further exploring the difference in attitudes and experiences between generation, future research could analyse the difference between genders. Due to time constraints and assumptions about difficulty gaining access, I was unable to incorporate men into this project, but this would be an interesting avenue for other researchers to look into. I would be curious to see if men had similar experiences to the women I interviewed in this project, especially in terms of being divorced or being a convert to Islam. The experiences of divorced versus single Muslim women, and of converts versus those born into a Muslim family would also be topics that could be researched further in light of the findings of this project.

At the beginning of this project, I decided to conduct one-on-one interviews as opposed to focus groups for a number of reasons. I feel that in future research, it would be useful to conduct group interviews for comparative purposes, as this topic doesn't appear to be frequently openly discussed amongst Muslims. I would also be curious to see whether the responses received would be notably different if the researcher was positioned with an "insider" status. It would perhaps also be useful in future research to incorporate some quantitative data, for example, contacting the administration of websites and apps to request some statistics on their users, although I don't know how practical this would be in terms of data protection.

It would be worth investigating this topic further through a theological lens - future research might explore the theological justifications and arguments for and against the use of matrimonial websites. My findings showed that this topic is not frequently discussed openly, at least within the communities my participants were part of. It would be illuminating to further research what religious scholars have written about this social phenomenon; how religious leaders are dealing with this technology; what guidance is being given at mosque-level; and even perhaps what is being said on online forums or sermons. Participant D's opinion that the mosque is more useful and appropriate for matchmaking would also be worth investigating further. A number of mosques in Britain, such as the East London mosque, are starting to offer marriage services and it would be interesting to explore questions such as what has prompted them to do so or how successful they are. Finally, online matrimonial sites are not the only "modern" method that Muslims in Britain are now using to find a spouse. Singles events, such as Muslim speed dating, are becoming increasingly popular in Britain and the same themes I have explored during this project could be extended to these methods in order to compare and contrast experiences and opinions. It is clear from the examples listed above that there are a multitude of avenues yet to be explored in this field, and I strongly feel that further research into this topic is essential in order to promote a better understanding of Muslims in Britain.

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Appendix A - Ethical Consent Form.



**Cardiff University
School of History, Archaeology and Religion**

**Consent Form for Postgraduate Dissertation: MA in Islam in Contemporary Britain.
What does the success of online matrimonial sites reveal about British Muslim women today?**

Name of Researcher: Grace Phelps

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet (attached) for the above interview. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, to ask questions and have had any questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I agree to take part in the interview.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Grace Phelps
Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix B - Project Summary/Information Sheet.

Project Summary and Information Sheet.

- Many thanks for agreeing to participate in this study. This information sheet explains what the study is about and how I would like you to participate in it.
- This interview is intended to be part of my postgraduate dissertation for the MA in Islam in Contemporary Britain I am currently undertaking at the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK, Cardiff University.
- The provisional title of my project is “What does the success of online matrimonial sites reveal about British Muslim women today?” I will be collecting and analysing different opinions about the process of finding a partner in Muslim communities in Cardiff, in order to discern whether there has been a shift from “traditional” to more “modern” methods.
- This is a semi-structured interview, so I won’t be strictly adhering to a single set of questions. If you do not understand a question, please let me know and I will try to clarify. If you do not want to answer a certain question, you are not obliged to do so and we can move on.
- This interview will be audio recorded and will last approximately between 30 and 45 minutes. The information provided by you will be anonymous and will only be used for research purposes.
- If you have any questions about the research at any stage, or you no longer wish to be involved, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix C - Interview Schedule.

1. At what age did you sign up for a matrimonial site, and what were you reasons for doing so?

2. Had you ever been married previously?
3. Had you experienced problems finding a partner through more traditional ways? Why do you think that was?
4. Can you talk me through the process of signing up for and using a matrimonial site - how did it work?
5. Do you think this method is an Islamically permissible way to find a spouse?
6. What makes it different from “online dating”?
7. How many other women do you know, approximately, that have used online matrimonial sites?
8. Do you think it is fair to say that online matrimonial sites allow women more freedom and choice than more traditional ways of finding a partner? Was this something that drew you personally to this method?
9. Did you instigate conversations with potential partners or did you wait for them to contact you?
10. Overall, was it a positive or negative experience for you? (If positive, did you experience any negative aspects, and vice versa?)
11. Would you encourage other Muslim women to use this method?
12. How did your family and friends react to you signing up for the site?
13. Do you think it is more popular with older or younger women, and for what reasons?
14. How important is love and romance to you?
15. Do you think living in the West/a non-Muslim majority country has affected your view of marriage at all?
16. Why do you think these websites have become so popular in recent years?