

## Navigating Muslim Identity and Customs in Online Dating

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### Abstract

Marriage is at the intersection of lives and families—the intersection of personal life and larger society—and as life and technology become further intertwined, marriage can be at the intersection of tradition, religion, and technology. This paper will study Muslim dating and matrimony websites and how the use of such websites interacts with religious and social customs regarding courting and marriage. This paper is broken into three sections: the reasons for which people join Muslim matchmaking websites; how online matchmaking presents a new framework in which people can articulate and express their identity; and how matchmaking websites can either alter or reinforce traditional courtship and marriage norms. Drawing on personal accounts, news articles, and scholarly research, this paper found that Muslim dating websites created a compelling technological framework of choice for individual articulation of identity, relationship needs, and optional integration of traditional courtship norms. Speaking to the adaptability of identity and custom, this study directly counters the ideation of religion, specifically Islam, and modernity as opposing ends of a societal binary.

## Introduction

Beyond eHarmony and Match.com, there is a booming industry of Muslim online dating websites. From sites like SingleMuslims.com to MuslimMatrimony.com, Muslims around the world are able to search for a partner through the internet. In an interview, founder of SingleMuslims.com Adeem Younis stated that Muslim dating websites are different from secular dating websites because they have a serious community and religious duty. The aim of these websites is to produce marriages, not casual couples or hook-ups, in order to uphold the importance of marriage in Muslim cultures (Green, 2014). Today, a single Google search for “Muslim online dating” results in a deluge of “Top 10 Muslim Dating Sites,” links for general Muslim dating websites like Muslims4Marriage.com, Arab-specific websites like LoveHabibi.com, and articles on secular dating sites advertising services for Muslim singles.

In other aspects of Muslim life, the internet has enabled new ways to approach and practice religion; for instance, the ubiquity of online fatwas (religious rulings from an Islamic authority) has created a new digital environment for religious authority and means for individuals seeking religious advice (Sisler, 2011). With the rise of Muslim dating websites, does this use of technology impact Muslim identity and norms regarding romantic relationships? First, this paper will discuss the various reasons Muslim singles use online dating and Muslim-specific dating websites. The second section of the paper will analyze how individuals on Muslim dating websites present and integrate their religious identity online. The last section will discuss how Islamic marriage and courtship norms react within the realm of online dating.

Resources for this paper include primary accounts from an anthology of essays of Muslim women’s experiences with love and scholarly articles on Islam, matchmaking, and identity. Previous work on the topic of Muslims dating online explores the expressions of identity, tradition, and partner preferences. This paper seeks to contribute to the extant work by discussing dating websites as a specialized and highly accessible framework for choice: choice in partner, choice in identity expression, and choice in traditional integration. It is important to research the relationship between online dating and Islam for further understanding about the impact of the internet on social and religious practices. Specifically regarding technology and marriage in Islam, it is important to study online dating as an instrument of building families and communities.

## Looking For Love

Why do people join Muslim-specific online dating websites? Beyond the reasons anyone would seek out a potential life partner (love and companionship), there are social, cultural, religious, and geographical factors that may bring someone to register an account with a Muslim dating or matrimonial website.

Use of the Internet, social media, and dating websites is intertwined, as evidenced in the book of personal essays *Love, InshAllah*. In a chapter titled *Cyber Love*, Muslim women write about their experiences with the internet in finding their partners. In one essay, Lena Hassan describes how communicating with men on the Internet enabled her to present herself as she chose and to avoid the judgement she encountered as a hijab-wearing Muslim in the United States (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012). She stated that the internet enabled her to “present [herself] at [her] own pace, on [her] own terms” (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012). Lena Hassan’s view of interactions over the internet portrays both a general and specific utility of online communications: she was able to surpass her shyness, but she was also able to have more agency in navigating people’s perceptions of her as a hijab-wearing Muslim woman.

*Love, InshAllah* also includes the narratives of women using the Internet to express more specificity in their choice of partner. One writer, Suzanne Syeda Shah, was able to use MySpace to locate “black or Latino college-age Muslim men within a three-hundred mile radius” (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012). Another essayist, Molly Elian Carlson, describes how she used a Muslim matrimonial site to express her specific conditions for a potential husband: “Looking for a Spanish-speaking Muslim to marry—must not be divorced or already have a wife” (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012). In these cases, the Internet served as an instrument for women to not only seek out eligible Muslim men, but also locate men within certain cultural specificities. In both of these essays, the women had personal reasons to seek out black or Latino male Muslims, not family or community requirements. Dating websites and social media offered a platform to express their specific conditions for partners and access a larger dating pool to increase the chance of meeting a suitable partner.

Access to a dating pool not restricted by geography is a distinctive aspect of Muslim online dating. Depending on the size of the Muslim community, an individual’s options for seeking a Muslim partner can be severely limited without the Internet. In this way, online dating presents an alternative to the physical demands of place-based dating and courtship. Seeking a Muslim partner in one’s immediate surroundings may not be viable, due to a small Muslim community, or even preferable, depending on the individual’s desired traits in a partner.

While online dating increases accessibility and choice in the partner selection process, it also removes the very literal restrictions that inhibit place-based dating. Without the confines of physical geographic space, digital space and online dating allow individuals to engage in partner selection and exploratory conversations. For some, place-based dating is either hindered or rendered impossible because of varying degrees of immobility that restrict independent movement outside of the house or the occupation of mixed-gender spaces. The issue of mobility is fairly present in the collection of essays. Suzanne Syeda Shah stated that her introduction to search for single Muslim men online was spurred by her

mother's strict rules about leaving the house (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012). For Lena Hassan, once the courtship process formally started with her online love, the communication and shared space between her and her suitor became restricted for the sake of propriety. Throughout this process, she used email to maintain a degree of intimacy and independence (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012). In both examples, the Internet was an instrument through which the individuals or couples could circumvent family and community standards of propriety while still technically in compliance with the social rules. In addition to increasing the ease of navigating social etiquette, online relationships can transcend the inability to leave the house, the country, or meet with a love interest privately.

The founder of the online dating site Ishqr, Humaira Mubeen, discusses in an interview how Muslim dating websites can serve as a way for young Muslims to maintain their cultural and religious identity without the formality of earlier generations' rules about courtship and family supervision (Clozel, 2015). To Mubeen, online dating for American Muslims provides a space for them to meet and marry within their faith, expand their community, and meet young peers also reckoning with being Muslim in a Western context (Clozel, 2015). An ethnographic study on American Muslim women suggested that the essential allure for online dating is the balance between increased agency, privacy, and the desire to adhere to cultural and religious courtship practices (Rochadiat, Tong, & Novak, 2017). Both Mubeen's comments and the study's findings echo the experiences recorded in *Love, InshAllah*. In the personal accounts from *Love, InshAllah*, agency over presentation, access to a dating pool larger than their immediate Muslim community, the ability to seek cultural specifications and avoid some of the social etiquette involved with in-person courtship, such as the supervision of parents and curfews, are all reasons to choose to use the Internet in search for a life partner.

### Identity Online

Religious and cultural identity is a significant aspect to the online dating process. Both presenting and seeking out indicators of identity online creates a framework of religious and cultural expression to navigate. What are religious and cultural indicators on dating profiles? Are they to express a personal characteristic, attract a certain kind of partner, or both? This section will discuss the dynamics of religious expression on Muslim dating websites, with a particular focus on visual indicators, such as the hijab. It is important to note that a limitation in the study of visual indicators of religiosity in the context of sexuality and partner-searching is the singular focus on the veil. While this section will discuss the hijab in the context of heterosexual dating norms, it will also discuss the textual expressions of religious and cultural identity involved in profile creation on Muslim dating websites.

A central visual indicator of culture and religious both online and offline is the hijab, or headscarf. In an early study on Shia Canadian youth

using online dating to find a spouse, the hijab is discussed as an important signifier due to its clearly visible presence (Zwick & Chelariu, 2006). On an individual level, the study frames the hijab as not only an indicator of religion, but an indicator of attitudes (Zwick & Chelariu, 2006). Although Zwick and Chelariu position the hijab in an outdated, arbitrary binary of conservative versus liberal, they outline the relationship among the hijab as a visual indicator, the wearer, and individuals viewing dating profiles. They argue that “male suitors looking for shortcuts to assess the suitability for a potential wife use the hijab as a way to reduce social risk” (Zwick & Chelariu, 2006). The study centers on a concept of “willingness to wear the hijab after marriage” as the shared communication between the wearer and potential suitors online (Zwick & Chelariu, 2006). One of the issues with this study is the framing of the hijab as something that is *only* mobilized as an instrument to attract a partner based on perceived religiosity. While Zwick and Chelariu do not take into consideration the personal choice and agency of women wearing the hijab, as well as the complexities of meaning surrounding the hijab, they establish the foundation of how the hijab in the context of online dating is a means for signaling potential partners.

To compensate for the lack of nuance regarding Zwick and Chelariu’s approach to the personal meaning and value, it is important to discuss the role of the hijab in heterosexual sexual attraction and desire. In an ethnographic study on flirtations between men and women in downtown Tunis, the conflated dichotomy between good, bad, pure, impure, conservative, and progressive is problematized. The study identifies different forms of desire that manifest in the flirtations with covered and uncovered women in the street markets: a sexualized, generalized desire and an intimate, personalized desire predicated on interpersonal interaction. Desire and the hijab is an important discussion to insert into Zwick and Chelariu’s framework of identity indicators on dating websites. The “mobilization of the hijab” in Zwick and Chelariu’s research is contingent on the hijab and the hijab-wearer being without attractive qualities outside religion and religious norms. By taking into consideration the personalized desire described by Hawkins, the hijab as a religious garment is intertwined with the concept of differentiated desire and online suitors’ perception of the hijab. Instead of the central message signaled by the hijab between individuals on dating websites being a confirmed willingness to wear the hijab after marriage, there is a more complex interaction. As in Hawkins’ study, the men did not catcall to women in the hijab because the hijab altered *their* behavior and *their* approach; women who wore the hijab were spoken to in a more intimate, humble, and structured manner (Hawkins, 2008). In the context of online dating, this dynamic brings into consideration that the hijab does not necessarily transmit only values and piety, but rather triggers a change in sexual-social behavior in men. In a setting of desire and dating, the meaning of the hijab is produced between individuals, with the potential suitors’ perception of

the hijab shaping the interactions and approach to flirtation. While discussing the role of interpretations of the hijab in social interactions, it is important to note that, according to Hawkins, interpretations “depend on the form of the hijab, the age and social identity of the wearer, her behavior, the context in which it is worn, and the social identity of the viewer” (Hawkins, 2008). Within the social coding of desire and flirtations between men and hijab-wearing women, there is further personal and situational nuance.

In Hawkins’ ethnology, the social meaning of the hijab is also discussed in the context of courtship and marriage. Some of the men in the study stated that, for them, women in the hijab would make good wives because they could help make their husbands more pious (Hawkins, 2008). However, Hawkins identifies a contradiction in the understanding of women who wear the hijab as potential wives. While men perceive the hijab as a sign of religiousness, it is not necessarily viewed as a signal of purity, but rather an indicator of good character and marriageability. This slight tension in the ideas of the hijab, public modesty, religiousness, and marriageability creates space to evaluate the woman’s behavior. The study found that that a woman’s flirtatious behavior could negate the effect that the presence of her hijab has on young men’s behavior, which changes the scheme of propriety and communication (Hawkins, 2008). While judging a woman to be less pure, valuable, or marriageable because of a few interactions is problematic, the dynamic illustrates that behavior and personality can outweigh the hijab as an indicator for character for marriageability. Acknowledging this relationship between behavior, the perception of the hijab, and marriageability is important for establishing the agency of women as individuals with unique personalities, not as a hijab-wearing monolith. In the framework of online dating and the hijab as an indicator, other Muslim singles may interpret the hijab initially to be a signal of a marriage-seeking woman. However, this impression can obviously change as people become more familiar with each other, as behavior outweighs the symbolic understanding of the hijab.

Additionally, the hijab in the context of online dating can potentially have agenda-setting power or association with motivation: the shift from dating to matrimony. Zwick and Chelariu’s framework of online dating situates the hijab as an indicator of “willingness to wear the hijab after marriage,” which takes for granted that within their argument they are asserting marriage is an inevitable aspect of the interaction. Taking into consideration Hawkins’ findings that single Muslim men tend to view hijab-wearing women as marriage-seekers, the initial impression is not just a willingness to wear the hijab, but instead it is the willingness to get married. Similar to the dynamics of desire and flirtation, the relationship between the hijab and marriageability are mobilized in the man’s interpretation of the hijab and its social meaning.

In Zwick and Chelariu’s study, women are framed as the ones who “mobilize” the hijab as a visual indicator to express religion. In

researching the situation of the hijab in heterosexual social and romantic interaction, I would argue that the directionality of the hijab as a visual indicator in a dating context is mainly initiated in men's varying social interpretations of the hijab. Merging Zwick and Chelariu's concept of visual indicators in Muslim online dating with Hawkins' study of the hijab, desire, and dating creates a framework in which the hijab as a visual indicator prompts a complex process of attraction, communication, and commitment. Navigation of identity on Muslim dating websites entails the religious and social associations with the hijab, which is a highly visual attribute in the context of a highly visual online space. For men, this can mean processing what communication and commitment norms are attached to the hijab. For women, this can mean dealing with the assumptions made about them based on their hijab, an experience echoed in the personal accounts of the essayists in *Love, InshAllah* (Maznavi & Mattu, 2012).

Navigation of identity on Muslim dating websites involves more than the perceptions and interpersonal processes surrounding the hijab. The use of Muslim-specific online dating services is in and of itself an expression of religious and cultural identity, particularly for Muslims in a religious minority community. For example, some Muslim online dating services have a require users to answer questions about their religious sect, religiousness (in degrees of practicing or non-practicing), frequency of prayer, whether or not they eat Halal or drink alcohol or smoke, if they are a convert, and how soon they want to get married (de Rooij, 2016). Through setting up a profile, users are able to put their identity in specific terms and in a way that is familiar to their cultural-religious community.

Additionally, this informational set-up process creates an identity-based framework to communicate with potential matches. By searching for potential matches based on these community-specific terms, the process of online dating as an intermediary makes navigation of identity easier and more streamlined (de Rooij, 2016). The process of digital self-identification not only makes it simpler find points of commonality and difference between potential partners, it also normalizes these attributes as trait to consider in the online dating process. On a secular dating website without these profile identifiers, Muslim singles seeking a Muslim partner have to actively and independently seek out desired characteristics in a digital space without cultural or religious context.

When discussing how cultural and religious identity interacts within the realm of online dating, two main topics arise: presentation of identity, or visual indicator of cultural-religious identity like the hijab, and the communication of specifics within shared identity. Online dating, especially Muslim-specific online dating websites, establishes a framework through which users reckon with the meaning of visual indicators of identity, processes and behaviors surrounding visual indicator of identity, the terms of their own identity, and the terms of the identity of potential partners.

### Online Dating and Courtship Customs

One of the most notable aspects of Muslim online dating is how it is integrated into an existing network of cultural and religious courtship norms. In addition to the geographical impact of dating websites to allow individuals to meet potential partners outside their immediate Muslim community, there are social, religious, and cultural traditions to consider in the process of finding a spouse online.

When discussing the relationship between online dating and traditional matrimony for Muslims, there is the additive outlook that frames Muslim dating website as a “combination of modern technology with Islamic principles” (Ahmed, 2013). This approach coincides with a narrative of modernity as opposite to Islam and Islamic values. While the binary that this framing taps into is embedded in problematic essentialism, the additive outlook ultimately views Muslim online dating as a way for Muslims to operationalize technology for traditional and religious benefit. In this perspective of how online dating relates to matrimonial and courtship traditions, online dating does not conflict with customs; instead, online dating in a way heightens cultural and religious traditions because it encourages the concept and the search for an “ideal Muslim spouse” (Ahmed, 2013).

However, there are concerns over the legality and decency of Muslim online dating, even within the aforementioned additive perspective. In an ethnographic study on British Pakistani Muslims participating in online dating, respondents felt that Muslim matrimony websites could be used in a lawful way but had risks for inappropriate temptation and escalation of “free mixing” between men and women (Ahmed, 2013). Some religious scholars have argued that online dating and chatting through matrimonial websites makes it easier to “breach established cultural norms and adopting new forms of behavior” with regards to standards of privacy between unmarried men and women (Ahmed, 2013). The concerns over propriety and maintenance of mixed-gender communication norms illustrate how online dating, even viewed in a positive additive framework with Islamic principles, can introduce complications and conflict over the potential for inappropriate temptation. The critiques of lawfulness and morality surrounding online dating also position the cultural and religious traditions as the moral ideal and norm, and deviation from the norm translates into a deviation from ethics.

There is also the perception of online dating and matrimonial websites as a means to navigate around traditions and customs, as mentioned in the earlier section regarding the potential reasons for participating in Muslim-specific online dating. In the ethnographic study on British Pakistani Muslims with profiles on dating websites, participants expressed that matrimonial websites were a way to assert individualism and avoid a parentally-involved traditional matchmaking process (Ahmed, 2013). The traditional method of family-involved matchmaking was also framed by



the participants as an obstacle to other aspects of their lifestyle; it seemed not applicable in a “modern” context, particularly for second-generation immigrant young people (Ahmed, 2013). Since traditional methods of matchmaking feels incompatible for some Muslim singles, online dating presents a way to maintain individuality within an established framework of matchmaking customs that normalize family involvement.

However, the mobilization of individuality in Muslim-specific dating websites is not always used to completely exclude family involvement in the match-finding process. In some personal accounts of individuals on Muslim dating websites, users would ask parents and other family members to assist with self-presentation on their profile and review potential matches before meeting (de Rooij, 2016). In some cases, more formal matrimonial websites are formatted for profiles to be managed by parents or other family members (Naji Bajnaid & Elvas, 2017). The involvement of family members in the online dating profiles and selection processes illustrates the maintenance of family-oriented values that are at the core of traditional matchmaking continued in Muslim online dating services. The integration of family members in the online dating processes also reflects the additive perspective of online dating, which focuses on the preservation of Islamic values within new, technology-based methods. The degrees of individuality and family involvement indicate that online dating can be used as a tool in various ways to negotiate traditionalism in a technological context.

In the context of various traditional means of finding a spouse, online dating is a way to both adhere to and circumvent courtship norms. Especially with Muslim-specific online dating and matrimonial websites, the digital space upholds the values of family and the concept of an ideal Muslim spouse. Critiques about the lawfulness or ethics of online dating emphasize not an explicit wrongdoing, but rather a potential for inappropriateness within the platform. The varying degrees of individualism and family involvement illustrate that online dating services are flexible to the standards and preferences of the user. Ultimately, online dating is not antithetical to Islamic values, traditions, or norms. The additive perspective of online dating as a combination of modern technology and Islamic principles is an important framework for understanding not only the expression of Muslim identity and norms online, but also the ability for the individual user to seek out a partner online without neglecting their religious and cultural values.

## Conclusion

Muslim online dating includes a vast market of services for those looking for a partner beyond their geographical access to the Muslim community. Throughout the discussion of online dating and its processes, the themes of individuality and maintenance of religious values stand out as integral elements of Muslim dating websites. Increased choice, expression of religious and cultural identity, and the ability to include or exclude family

involvement are strong allures for Muslim online dating. The integration of religious values and courtship norms into the online dating process exemplifies the use of the internet as a way to adapt and potentially amplify Muslim identity and principles. In this paper, one can see a mutual adaptability between cultural norms and technological platforms.

The presentation of Muslim identity online is an important part of understanding the relationship between visual cues, online dating processes, and attraction. While the dynamics of visual presentation of Muslim identity, discussed through the hijab, are not vastly different from in-person interactions, the image-based format of online dating can heighten the role of visual indicators in interactions. Other than the subliminal activity of visual presentations, Muslim online dating websites provide a platform in which users can explicitly state their identity, details of their practice and lifestyle, as well as their preferences. In the network of online dating, navigation and articulation of identity is both easier and more difficult. Built-in specifications for partner preferences significant to traditional norms allow users to clearly communicate their cultural expectations as personal relationship needs, without need for implicit coding in profile pictures.

The significance of studying online dating, Muslim identity, and religious-cultural norms lies in understanding the ways in which people are meeting and families are forming. Other than discussing the importance of marriage in Islam, analysis of Muslim online dating also contributes to the deconstruction of false dichotomies. The binary of Islam being opposed to or incompatible with modernity is directly undermined by the adaptation of Muslim identity and principles to the technological platform of dating websites.

Limitations of this study include heteronormativity in the realm of online dating. Online dating for queer Muslims could potentially be even more instrumental in finding a partner than for heterosexual individuals. With regards to the transcendence of limited physical proximity to potential partners through access of digital space, queer Muslims seeking other queer Muslims may have exposure to a larger dating pool online. Online dating for queer Muslims may even be a matter of safety and secrecy for those not public about their sexuality to their families and communities. Queerness, Islam, and online dating is an important topic that should be considered in future research as discussion of Muslim online dating develops. Another limitation is the lack of scholarship on men's visual representation on religious and cultural identity in the context of matchmaking, online dating, or partner-seeking. While studies on the religiosity of young Muslim men exist, they largely consider behavior-based indicators such as prayer attendance. Visual indicators are important to explore in the study of online dating because of the highly visual nature of online interactions, where users review profiles before deciding to engage with potential partners.

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