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E-Arranged Marriages:

How have Muslim matrimonial websites affected traditional Islamic courting methods?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the effects and impact that online Muslim matrimonial websites have on traditional Islamic courting methods. Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with a sample of second generation British Asian Muslims, this study aimed to achieve an insight into how orthodox and traditional Islamic methods of finding a spouse are being challenged amongst this diaspora. It also hoped to validate claims commentators (Thompson and Huntington, 2003) make, namely that processes of globalisation and modernity are exacerbating tensions between first and second generation Pakistanis living in Britain.

Although there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research within this specific area, this study nonetheless uncovered interesting findings into current social and cultural interpretations of marriage in Islam. These are categorised into three emergent core themes, namely 'Motives' (examining motivations of users), 'Drawbacks' (limitations and negative outcomes) and 'Tradition failure' (as experienced by users).

Overall, this study found that British Asian Muslims are struggling to reconcile their faith, culture and individuality in an unchartered socio-technological age. Further research is recommended to look at a wider demographic of British Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

Muslims are one of the most observed and debated communities in Britain today. As one of the fastest growing diasporas in the country (Thompson, 2008), Islamic culture, traditions and beliefs have been thrust into the spotlight since the 7/7 attacks in London, and the events of 9/11. The number of Muslims living in the UK is estimated to be between 2 - 3 million, according to the latest UK Census 2011 (exact figures to be published by February 2013) and a 2010 US report on Muslim diasporas in Europe. Britain witnessed an influx of Muslim immigrants (the majority from the South Asian region) entering the country for employment throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Nielsen, 2004). With this, came a wave of Islamic cultural norms and traditions that many first generation Asian Muslims have attempted to uphold and pass onto their children. Prominent authors on contemporary Western Islamic history such as Tariq Ramadan have noted upon the tensions that arose between first generation Muslims and later generations, in regards to their approach towards cultural and Islamic teachings in an ever-evolving modern world (2003).

Muslim Minorities

Over 40 percent of today's Muslims around the world live in minority situations amongst a wider community, in a non-Muslim state (Mandaville, 2001: 173). Muslim communities in Western societies are embroiled in complex debates concerning the very nature and boundaries of their faith. Additionally, issues regarding heritage, identity and 'Britishness' are constantly posed at Muslims growing up in the UK (Ahmad and Sardar, 2012). Ramadan has shed light on the growing tensions facing young Muslim diasporas, specifically when it comes to identity.

Ramadan (2003: 83). stresses the need for Muslims to integrate in Western societies whilst upholding their Islamic faith:

> "The great responsibility of Muslims in the West is to dress these four dimensions [faith, understanding, education and transmission] of their identity in a Western culture while staying faithful to the Islamic sources, which, with their conception of life, death and Creation, remain the fundamental frame of reference"

In addition to this, there has also been an emphasis on the struggles to maintain both cultural and Islamic traditions. Authors such as Jessica Jacobsen have focused primarily on the Pakistani community in Britain, who represent 43% of Muslims living in the UK and the

conflicts between first and second-generation citizens (1997). The struggle in balancing tradition (faith) and modern, Western cultural norms is present in wider debates concerning the effects and consequences of phenomena such as globalisation, modernity and to some degree, westernisation. Authors such as Giddens (1999), have observed the impact these concepts can have on self-identity and also, on social institutions such as marriage. Marriage and the family, he argues, have evolved; "they are still called the same, but inside their basic character has changed" (Giddens, 1999: 58).

Marriage & Online Media

In respect to Muslims though, literature concerning social institutions such as family and marriage has been dominated by feminist critique, which observes the apparent unequal role of women in Muslim societies (Ahmed, 1992). Thus there is relatively little written about the evolving dynamic of the Muslim marriage process, particularly in a modern Western minority context.

This recent upheaval is arguably more relevant given the rise of online social media usage and its impact on relationship forming by society in general (Thompson, 1995), though particularly in respect of Muslim communities around the world. As remarked by a recent *Economist* (2012) article, over one-third of Muslims in the Middle East have access to smart phones and the Internet (marginally above the world average). This is unsurprising given the well-documented usage of social media by lay Muslims during the 2010-11 Arab Spring. This is no different to Muslims in Britain, who as noted are a comparatively young community and technically savvy (US Congressional Research Service, 2011). Their social relationships have been dominated by online social media usage, and as this paper hopes to reveal, in actually forming key life relationships such as finding a husband or wife.

Hence, in respect to traditional Islamic law and beliefs, the process of marriage and actually finding a spouse are potentially being challenged by contemporary practices of Muslims with greater access to technology. This forms just one crest of the wave of identity and modernity that many Muslims are exposed to. This is potentially as relevant to Muslim minorities in a western context as with communities in a Muslim society, as embodied by the recent quote from one academic Bart Barendreft of Leiden University (albeit referencing Muslims in South-East Asia):

"Muslim youngsters are adopting technology to distance themselves from older, traditional practices while also challenging Western models" (Economist, 2012).

Therefore, the combination of Muslim minorities, questions of identity, the rise of online social media usage and reconciliation with practice of traditional Islamic belief systems provide for an interesting case study, which this paper hopes to explore in more detail.

Outline

The first part of this study will explore literature pertaining to current discussions on Asian Muslims in Britain, with reference to broader issues of 'identity,' marriage in Islam and among Pakistani communities. There will be a review of concepts concerning globalisation, modernity and westernisation and their encounters with Islam and Muslims in the West. The second part will propose the specific research questions, namely how have online matrimonial websites impacted traditional practices of a 1400-year-old religion. The third section will present a brief overview of the methodology used, which was qualitative in kind and focused on semi-structured interviews and a final, thematic analysis of data collected. Part four will present findings from analysis and reveal three emerging core themes. The final part of the study will evaluate, conclude and present findings that possibly indicate British Asian Muslims are struggling to find a balance between the modern versus traditional routes into marriage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslims in Britain

The issue of 'identity' concerning Muslims in Britain has become a hot topic of discussion. Identity according to authors Berger and Lukmann is a "phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between the individual and society" (Ameli, 2002: 28). Focusing on a wider perspective on identity construction, Manuel Castells has argued that identity (as a relative concept) should instead be viewed as a combination of individual experience and the association of several elements including; historical roots, educational, political and economic systems, geographical environment and religious understanding, practices and beliefs (Ameli, 2002: 29). Moreover, social institutions such as marriage and family are also equally important in providing individuals with a set of norms and customs to help form identities and general practices (Giddens, 1999).

Muslims have often been categorised within the broader concept of 'religious identities.' Religious identities comprise of religious principles, ideas, characteristics that are manifested through one's actions, thoughts and general behaviour (Ameli, 2002: 29). Ameli adds that religious identity is the "output of the interaction between over social structures and the latent understanding of the religion" (2002: 89).

For Muslims living in Britain moreover, authors such as Jacobsen (1997) have regarded the 'generation gap' between first and second generation Muslim diasporas, to be a determining factor in how Muslims distinguish themselves in Western societies. Her findings within this field indicate that young British Pakistanis tend to differentiate between religion and ethnicity as sources of identity; stating the former holds more significance than the latter (1997: 239). Islam, for Muslims, is central to their sense of who they are and is often regarded as not just a religion, but as a 'way of life.' The teachings of Islam therefore, "orient their [Muslims] behaviour in all spheres of life" (Jacobsen, 1997: 239). Whereas, ethnicity (perceived as a matter of attachment to a set of customs or traditions and to a country or region), was not seen to be an "all-encompassing frame of reference" in establishing identity (Jacobsen, 1997: 239).

Patterns of resistance towards first generation traditional and cultural customs have also been observed from her research. Findings found that a majority of British Pakistanis engage in certain forms of behaviour which are a "product of long-standing traditions of the Indian subcontinent, in particular, the Hindu or Sikh teachings, that have no basis in Islam"

(Jacobsen, 1997: 241). It should also be noted that Islam in the Indian subcontinent has historically, incorporated certain elements of pre-existing traditions and customs. Thus, the forms of rejection from second generation British Pakistanis typically revolves around their parents' culture and tradition, and are instead in favour of the "global appeal of intellectual Islam [which] offers the possibility of a wider world in which to live" (Jacobsen, 1997: 241). Essentially, a shift from traditions would cause friction and upset for first generation migrants who hold them in high regard. As Warner suggests: "religious identities… often (but not always) mean more to [individuals] away from their home, in their diaspora, than they did before" (1998: 3). This tension between generations has been referred to by Ramadan (2003) as 'intergenerational conflicts'.

Marriage in Islam

> "When a man marries he has fulfilled half of the deen; so let him fear Allah regarding the remaining half" - Hadith (Reported by Al-Tirmidi)

Social institutions such as marriage are of great significance and importance for Muslims. As the above *hadith* (sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad) iterates, marriage is often considered to equate to half of one's faith. There are specific guidelines for Muslims wanting to get married as stated in Islamic law (*Shariah*) including general codes of conduct for both men and women regarding etiquette and interaction. Rules regarding marriage are also addressed in the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (approved actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad), which both constitute the two major sources of the *Shariah* (Kamali, 2008).

Amongst these rules regarding pre-marital interaction between men and women are: no flirting or physical contact between the prospective individuals, the presence of a chaperone (*mahram*) in meetings and to observe modesty (*haya*) in correspondence and conversations. More specifically, Islamic scholars and Sheikhs alike have most often stressed the prohibition of physical contact before marriage as stated in *Shariah*. Sheikh Muhammad Rif'at Uthman for example has stated: "it is not permitted for the proposer to touch any part of his prospective wife's body… He is not permitted to touch even the face of any woman who is unrelated to him nor is she permitted to allow that of her own accord" (2003: 13). Furthermore, it is advised men and women should not indulge in private meetings. The "modern custom of dating" as Muhammad Abdul-Rauf notes, is not only harmful and dangerous but also, severely condemned and prohibited (1996: 12). He refers to a *hadith* that condoned seclusion between men and women: "a man and a woman never meet alone except that Satan becomes their third party" (Abdul-Rauf, 1996: 12).

There is a general sense of conservatism in interactions that must be upheld by Muslim men and women, which is often stressed by the *ulema* (a disparate assortment of accredited, self-certified and intra-contested Muslim scholars, across a range of different schools of thought, which operate in every locality around the Muslim world). Men and women are advised not to speak with each other for purposes of socialization or as a pass time. It is deemed *haram* (unlawful) for a non-*mahram* Muslim male and female to indulge in long conversations with each other, unless it is necessary for education or business (Larsson, 2011: 157). For those looking to get married, intimate conversations between males and females as well as the exchange of love letters is not permissible in Islam. For most *ulema* therefore, a separation of the sexes is essential and viewed as a prerequisite for the perseveration of Islamic ethics (Larsson, 2011: 158). These rules are imposed for the protection of both men and women, while the separation of the sexes should help them avoid "wrong thoughts and sexual feelings," that ultimately, will keep them chaste and uphold the importance of purity (Larsson, 2011: 158).

Marriage in Pakistani Culture

Weddings in South Asian cultures tend to be protracted events that signal the end of "lengthy negotiations" between the two families (Seth and Patnayakuni, 2009: 330). The practice of 'arranged marriages' is a popular tradition widely used in the Asian subcontinent, and amongst Pakistani communities. Conventionally arranged marriages, within the South Asian community, involve one's parents and immediate or extended family in finding a potential spouse. This method has been viewed as a polar opposite to a Western concept of marriage whereby marriage "is an expression of a fundamental liberty, the individual's right to choose a partner" (Shaw, 2001: 323). In some more extreme cases, 'forced marriages' can often take place, which involves little or no consent from the prospective bride or groom. Although, Islam does permit parents and family to suggest suitable spouses for their Muslim children, as Jacobsen (1997: 241) has identified, arranged marriages are perceived to be a "traditional or cultural rather than religious practise". According to Stopes-Roe and Cochrane (1990), there are two types of arranged marriages. Firstly, there are those initiated by parents or family members; this includes setting up introductory meetings through family networks and exchanging photographs of sons or daughters to prospective partners. This form observes decisions made primarily by the couple's guardians, with that being priority over personal self-interest. The second form appear to be conventionally arranged but have witnessed the bride, groom or couple either engineering the situation, making important decisions or through initiating the process themselves (Stopes-Roe and Cochrane, 1990). These have been

referred to as 'arranged love marriages' as it recognises a level of influence from the couple. 'Love marriages' on the other hand, constitute a "public defiance of parental plans" (Shaw, 2001: 324).

Another important practice within Pakistani culture, which finds it's bearing in Islam, is respecting and appreciating your parents. It is written, in the *Qur'an*:

> "And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as] 'uff' [i.e., an expression of irritation or disapproval] and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word. And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy and say: 'My Lord! Have mercy upon them as they brought me up [when I was] small'" (Qur'an, 17:23-24).

Additionally, the notion of 'community,' the eagerness from Muslims to assert their distinctiveness from and over non-Muslim groups, is also central to Islamic thought (Shaw, 2001: 249). These two encompassing values, arguably, bear much pressure for second generation British Pakistanis and from prior research in this field, seem to affect how one approaches life-changing decisions.

Globalisation, Modernity and Westernisation

However, these Islamic and cultural traditions have arguably been challenged by processes of globalisation, modernity and to some degree, westernisation. The concept of globalisation contributes to our understanding of the growing and increasingly interwoven networks that individuals and communities hold with each other in modernity (Giddens, 2002). It has traditionally been associated with fundamental changes in the world economy and the shift to a competitive, single, self-consuming market place. However, globalisation also refers to the social, political, cultural and technological exchanges between people and also nation states. The current phase of globalisation, as argued by authors such as Ali Mohammadi, is associated with 'marketization' which some also see as leading to the "emptying out of culture, the weakening and dilution of local cultures" (2002: 2). From this perspective therefore, those who reject globalisation are castigated with the blame-word, 'tradition' (Mohammadi, 2002: 2).

Current Western discourse has often suggested that Muslims are in opposition to modernity, its expressions of globality and processes of modernisation (Mohammadi, 2002: 36). The experience of modernity has also been characterised by a crisis of identity; the breakdown of traditional forms of collective identity and thought, and resulted in the emergence of the

individual, both in philosophical and political terms (Thompson, 2003: 1). Reservations about modernity and its effects, conversely, are not only confined to Muslims but also other non-western faiths and cultures (Thompson, 2003: 166). Modernity, on the other hand, as a set of objective conditions has arguably never been a problem with Muslims. Yet, as Thompson theorizes, conflating modernity with 'westernisation' has conversely, created serious problems and this fusion have been rejected by almost all Muslim cultures (2003: 16). The concept of westernisation, according to Huntington, concerns the evolution of certain values such as liberty, individualism, the development of a 'public sphere,' the separation of secular and sacred realms within government as well as the promotion of political and social equality (Thompson, 2003: 32). The attitudes, values and culture of people in a modern, Western society as Huntington has observed, differ greatly for those in a traditional society. The requirements of westernisation all seem to relate to current western values and institutions. In particular, individualism has been noted as the core concept in westernisation. Muslims, moderate or radical reject, individualism of the type "extolled by the West because their emphasis is on the family" (Thompson, 2003: 12). Ultimately, individualism has resulted in the self-centred western person; "heedless of the need of other, indulging in consumerism willing to destroy nature and man to keep up the lifestyle that accompanies the market economy" (Thompson, 2003: 10). Radical Muslims as commentator Haroun Er-Rashid notes have had a long-standing grouse against Western culture. According to them, the Western world reflects the deterioration of family-centred life through the promotion of lax sexual mores and deviant behaviour; sexual mores is one of the "sorest" issues between the West and Muslims, as Muslims disapprove of free mixing of sexes, outside the family circle (Thompson, 2003: 13).

More importantly, Giddens (1999) has observed, among the changes occurring around the world, none is as important as the effects globalisation and modernity have on our personal lives. He argues that there is a "global revolution" taking place, which questions how individuals think, define themselves and interact with others (1999: 51). There are certain consequences of globalisation that have resulted in a constant reflexivity of one's life. One consequence involves the process of 'detraditionalisation.' Globalisation and modernity have exposed local cultures and traditions to new cultures and ideas, which has often questioned the very existence of traditional practices. Resultantly, societies and cultures, according to Giddens, go through a process of detraditionalisation whereby traditions become "less and less" lived in the traditional way (1999: 43).

The Internet

One prominent feature of globalisation that is contributing to societal changes is the rise of information communication technologies (ICT). It has been argued by theorists, such as Kellner (2002: 287), that the Internet along with global computer networks makes globalisation possible. Despite this on-going debate, the spread of information, physically and virally has been revolutionised with the birth of the Internet and also, broadband. This media platform allows individuals to communicate to others on a global scale, and as Giddens (2002) puts forward, have led social relations to become increasingly mediated across space and time.

From the earliest stages of the Internet, Muslims have been very active in cyberspace (Larsson, 2011: 145). Since the attacks of 9/11, the study of Islam on the Internet has primarily concerned itself with that of extremist-orientated activity online: "the Internet has become a critical adjunct for researchers seeking to analyse aspects of Muslim beliefs [...] and is a primary source of information about movements, entities, and networks such as Al-Qaeda" (Bunt, 2009: 23). Academics David Eickelman and Jon Anderson have also contributed to several important studies regarding the more moderate interactions between the media, Muslims and society (2003). They note upon websites that facilitate religious and faith based concerns for practising Muslims, which also include a feature to pose questions to Islamic scholars and scanned texts of the *Qur'an* and *hadith* collections (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003).

However, for many religious groups, the Internet is also seen as both a challenge and a promise that can either erode authority or sustain the established power structure (Larsson, 2011: 149). The rise of the Internet as a feature of globalisation and modernity is also of grave concern for the Muslim *ulema*. The *ulema* have much authority as they are well versed in legal *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and are renowned in the Muslim community for their role as the arbiters of *Shariah* law. The prime task of the *ulema* is to help Muslims uphold their faith, as well as to take part in everyday activities without compromising their beliefs and morals and this includes online activity (Larsson, 2011: 154). For sections of ulema across the Muslim world, but particularly those specific to more conservative parts of the Muslim world (such as the Arabian Peninsula), modernity relegates religion to a private sphere and the increased role of new media processes are just as threatening.

Despite this, ICTs could also be used for maintaining, upholding and extending religious traditions (Larsson, 2011: 149). Muslims have creatively applied the Internet in the interest of

furthering their understanding of Islam for other believers, especially those affiliated to a specific worldview and, in some instances, a wider non-Muslim readership (Bunt, 2009: 13). The *ulema* have recognised that the Internet can also be used for good purposes, for correct objectives. Yet, for the practising Muslim it is the responsibility and the intention of the user, which decides whether the technology brings "harvest or sorrow" (Larsson, 2011: 152).

In order to make the best use of the Internet, the *ulema* suggest that Muslims must follow certain guidelines to avoid the disadvantages of the new technologies. For instance, Muslims, as believers should consider whether surfing on the Internet or participating in a chat group environment is more time-consuming than rewarding. The main concern with time is related to the Islamic view, as stated in the *Qur'an*, that our earthly lives are limited, and that one must always remember that we have to answer for our deeds, thoughts and actions in the afterlife (Larsson, 2011: 155). Muslims are also affected and "corrupted" by so called un-Islamic behaviour that frequently prevails in many online discussions, via social networking websites or messages boards (Larsson, 2011: 156). From this perspective, it could be argued that online behaviour and electronic communication are endangering Islamic ethics.

Online Matrimonial Websites

Certain features that have risen from the Internet such as social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter) and online dating websites have posed quite a dilemma for the Muslim community. Online dating websites for instance, which allow individuals to create profiles and initiate contact with others through an online service, have become one of the most frequently used services on the Internet (Hancock, 2007: 449). Internet users have recently witnessed the birth of online matrimonial websites, which are purpose built for those who want to find their ideal spouse. Although, the rise of online dating websites and issues of concerning gender and race have been well documented (Hancock, 2007; Romm-Livermore, et al., 2009; Kale and Spence, 2009), there has been less research focusing specifically on matrimonial websites and the impact they have on relationships and courting.

These matrimonial websites have become immensely popular in the UK and worldwide, but more interestingly, amongst various religious and ethnic groups. The Internet can be used as an efficient tool for finding an ideal and 'proper' Muslim husband or wife, especially for those Muslims living in countries or regions which are not dominated by Islamic traditions (Larsson, 2011: 159). Britain for instance, has seen an increase of Muslim matrimonial websites, such as 'Single Muslim' and 'Pure Matrimony.' Single Muslim advertises itself as,

"the new way – combining modern technology with Islamic principles" and provides for over 500,000 members.

However, according to the *ulema*, online dating and matrimonial websites, (as well as social networking websites) make it easier to break the law of *khalwa* (privacy) between men and women who are not married and from abstaining from contact or intimate conversation (Larsson, 2011: 158). This law of *khalwa* as argued by Islamic scholar, Dr Muzammil H. Siddiqi, now also applies to online 'chatting.' Moreover, the Internet provides users with a new way of "exploring and breaking established cultural norms and adopting new forms of behaviour" (Larsson, 2011: 159). This new technology has been used as the *ulema* and scholars such as Dr Siddiqui argue, for indecent flirtations and other forms of illicit behaviour, at least, to some extent. For instance, it is possible to flirt and set up meetings with a member of the opposite sex through social media, message boards and now, online matrimonial websites, without involving one's parents or relatives. The possibility of this is of great importance in communities and cultures that maintain strict boundaries between sexes. Overall, the *ulema* have become concerned with this new wave of technology that can be used for un-Islamic and immoral purposes and are perceived by some, as negative and destructive (Larsson, 2011: 165).

This online phenomenon can also pose a threat to traditional Pakistani customs. Notably, the online method could act in accordance with the second category of 'arranged marriages', which involves the bride or groom establishing and initiating the first point of contact (introductory meeting) with one another. Whether this method would be considered as an 'arranged love marriage' is yet to be determined and researched, however it is interesting to note how online matrimonial websites could potentially supersede parental involvement in the marriage process. Likewise, using the Internet to find a spouse could provoke a certain level of controversy within the community. As Jacobsen and Raj (2008) have argued, there is a stigma in using online dating or matrimonial websites amongst South Asian communities; who identify it as a deterrent to implementing traditional routes. They also argue that new techniques in finding a partner can also encourage inter-racial marriage, which although is not a religious restriction, has been discouraged by first generation Asians living in the UK and USA, for example (2008).

Conceptual Framework

The review of academic literature has revealed a number of influential studies regarding social and cultural aspects of British Asian Muslims. Firstly, Jacobsen's (1999) research provides a good framework into understanding the different components that characterise Muslim identity in Britain. Her argument concentrates on the role of religion and culture for Muslims living in a Western society. This provides essential background in how Pakistani Muslims position themselves in Britain and will also be useful in determining whether features of globalisation and modernity are impacting social institutions such as marriage. Additionally, her research also observes the tensions British Asian Muslims face in balancing ethnic and Islamic traditions. On this note, this research will be aligning itself with the arguments presented by Jacobsen.

Secondly, in regards to the Internet and spread of globalisation and modernity, commentators such as Thompson and Huntington provide a detailed account of the tensions between tradition and modernity (2003). The processes of globalisation including the rise of technological advances, have witnessed the growth of media platforms such as satellite television and the Internet. According to these authors, the Internet is a fundamental feature of these phenomena that is fuelling processes of modernisation. Moreover, Thompson's argument regarding certain features of westernisation such as individualism, have been in conflict with Islam (2003). This argument has been applied to Muslims living in Western societies, and will be used to inform this research study as it could provide guidance in understanding the affects and impact of modernity, such as the role of online matrimonial websites, on second generation British Asian Muslims today.

In regards to marital courting, *Shariah* law dictates rules of etiquette for both men and women when searching for a spouse. The *Qur'an*, *hadith* and *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad are prominent sources used by Muslims in ascertaining not only their identity, but also their general behaviour. Current key debates amongst the Muslim *ulema* have outlined the negative and positive effects of using the Internet with specific reference to social networking and matrimonial websites (Larsson, 2011). Research and publications by Islamic scholar Dr Muzammil H. Siddiqi can also be applied to Asian Muslims living in Britain as by default, they should adhere to Islamic rules and principles when using the Internet.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Therefore, this research study aims to investigate, given the rise of British Muslims on Islamic matrimonial websites, if this online approach has impacted traditional Islamic and cultural methods of courting? In particular, this research will be guided by the following sub-questions:

- How does the use of such technology affect cultural Pakistani norms among British Asian Muslims?

- Is the use of matrimonial websites indicative of a shift away from customs as implemented by first generation Pakistanis in Britain?

There is a lack of empirical research into the social and cultural effects of certain features of modernity, such as the role of new media and the Internet on Asian Muslims living in Britain. Rather discussions have focused on the broad impact of phenomena such as globalisation and westernisation have had on Muslims living in Islamic and non-Islamic states.

Arguably, in recognising the impact and effect of these websites it is hoped that this study could contribute to broader issues regarding 'self-identity' amongst Asian Muslims in Britain. Current debate within academia in relation to identity has noted upon the intergenerational tensions that many ethnic minorities face in Western societies. This study, therefore, hopes to shed light on how second generation Pakistani Muslims are coping in maintaining their parents' traditions whilst submitting to their religion, in an ever-globalized society.

METHODOLOGY

In preparation for this empirical research dissertation, a pilot study was conducted in April 2012 (Ahmed, 2012). The methodology used in the pilot study was inspired by methods of qualitative research analysis and, in particular, conducting interviews. Within social sciences, qualitative interviewing is a widely used method for data collection. Qualitative interviews can provide essential data in order to understand the relations between social actors and their situations (Gaskell, 2000: 39). Interviews are useful when you want to access detailed information on a person's behaviours and thoughts, or explore new issues in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006: 3). Prior research on Asian Muslims in Britain and their reactions towards modern phenomena such as the Internet, tended to use content analysis and ethnography as the main methodology. Content analysis, which has traditionally been used to identify

different types of online activity Muslims indulge in, is however, restricting for the researcher in access to detailed information. Additionally, ethnography although a helpful method in providing a psychological insight into user usage, it prohibits respondents to be self-reflective (Bunt, 2009). Other qualitative methods such as focus group interviews were also considered. Focus groups comprise of a discussion with a small number of participants and can also provide insight into motivations, opinions and attitudes towards a certain phenomenon. Yet, these are not always ideal for encouraging free expression and could often inhibit discussion if respondents feel shy to voice their thoughts among others (Smithson, 2000). As this empirical study aims to attain personal experiences relating to traditional and modern methods of finding a spouse, it was felt that individual interviews would be most the appropriate and suitable method to use.

Moreover, although there are a number of different types of interviews one could use in qualitative research, semi-structured interviews (which involve a set of open-ended questions to allow in-depth responses), worked well in the pilot study as they gave respondents a chance to discuss more broadly their thoughts and experiences in resorting to online matrimonial websites from traditional methods.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Throughout the pilot study, certain advantages and disadvantages arose when conducting interviews. There are a number of advantages for using interviewing as the main method for data collection. Interviews, unlike questionnaires or surveys, allow the opportunity for follow-up questions and specific answers from respondents are more easily gauged (Berger, 1998). Furthermore, interviews allow for greater flexibility in questioning the participant (Gordon, 1975: 77). There is also the added possibility of obtaining unexpected information, which other forms of research might not discover (Berger, 1998: 57). Interviews can facilitate rich detailed accounts of the respondents' motivations, experiences and perspectives on a particular phenomenon (Bambush, 2010: 255). Overall, interviews are a significant and valuable data collection strategy.

There were however, limitations and difficulties found in using the research method of interviewing when conducting the pilot study. Firstly, although conducting the interviews themselves is not generally time-consuming, transcribing on the other hand is a procedure that proved to require much time and concentration. Secondly, analysis of the transcripts as noted by Berger, is the most time-consuming part of the research process (1998). It is also important to recognise as Gaskell suggests, that a participant may view certain situations

through "distorted lenses" and provide an account, which could be misleading (Gaskell, 2000: 44). Furthermore, if the validity of the information collected in the interviews is not checked, there is the danger that it may lead the researcher to make invalid inferences about situations and events.

Sampling

For the pilot study, respondents, who were second generation Pakistanis, were recruited from a West London based Islamic matrimonial event in March 2012. These events are a common practise within Muslim communities as it offers men and women the chance to meet and network, with potential partners. The criteria set for the pilot study followed the information provided by 'Single Muslim' in early April, regarding user demographics including age and ethnicity. It was found that significant proportions of their online users are of South-Asian decent and fell within the age group of 25-35 years old. Respondents selected were thus, second generation Pakistanis whom represent a large majority of Muslims living in Britain today.[1]

In order to produce a more contained and analytical dissertation, this study will maintain focusing on second generation British Muslims from Pakistani decent. It should be noted that this study therefore is representative of this particular diaspora. This study also focuses on two Muslim matrimonial websites: Single Muslim, which is viewed as 'moderate', and Pure Matrimony that claims to be more strict and orthodox in practise. As Single Muslim was already contacted regarding user demographics, Pure Matrimony was subsequently contacted via email requesting similar information.[2] Given the popularity of both these websites in recent years, it was hoped that participants who had used these websites would allow for a more representative sample for this research study. For the purposes of this study however, in order to compliment user information from both websites, the age group of respondents sampled ranged from 25-35 years old.

Interviews were conducted with 15 participants in total (8 males and 7 females); each respondent fell into the certain demographic categories as previously stated (see appendix 1). Nine of these respondents had attended the same event in April 2012 and were contacted again to take part in this study. The other respondents on the other hand, were recommended

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[1] According to the 2001 UK Census publication, 43% of Muslims living in Britain are of a Pakistani background.

[2] Pure Matrimony stated that whilst a huge majority of their users were from South-Asian descent, the age group ranged from 25-40.

contacts from active participants who fit the required criteria and demographics for this study.

The interviews took place at a local café in West London, in a relatively quiet and intimidate setting, conducive for talking. Each interview was conducted face-to-face and lasted roughly up to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded via a digital Dictaphone and individually transcribed (see appendix 3). All responses given from each participant were on the condition of personal anonymity, which of course has been preserved throughout and consequently, consent forms were signed (see appendix 2).

Problems Encountered

As expected, there were a few obstacles in sample gathering for this study. One difficulty was recruiting enough female participants to conduct interviews with. There seemed to be much hesitancy amongst the female participants contacted, as they were reluctant to talk about the issue of marriage. One respondent had stated that she had encountered bad experiences in the past in finding a spouse and did not wish to voice her thoughts on this subject, as it would further upset her. However, in overcoming this, interviews were secured with the first several female participants and additional contacts were made as interviews progressed. This did however; lengthen the process of conducting and securing interviews.

Interview Guide

The interviews with participants followed Kvale's 'seven stages' of conducting a qualitative interview study. These include: "thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and finally reporting" (Kvale, 1996: 80). The initial stage of this research process was to formulate the purpose of the investigation; hence, developing a conceptual and theoretical framework was crucial to deploying the research.

The second part of the process was to formulate an interview guide, which can provide an easy and comfortable framework for discussion. It was essential that participants felt at ease in describing their personal experiences regarding online matrimonial websites and thoughts on upholding Islamic traditions in a modern age. These guides are also important for semi-structured interviews as it can help avoid the researcher from leading the discussion; instead it facilitates the respondents' descriptions of their experiences (Baumbush, 2010). Even

though the interview guide was prepared at beginning of this study, it was used with some flexibility.

Since conducting the pilot study, certain modifications were made to the interview guide. Originally, the guide was divided into two categories: views on traditional Islamic and cultural methods of courting and the Islamic authenticity of the websites. Yet, in order to gain a deeper insight into the impacts these websites have on courting methods an additional third category was added. This final category focused on the positive or negative affects online matrimonial websites had on individuals and how they thus, approached traditional Asian customs. The guide contained both content mapping and content mining questions, traditionally used in semi-structured interviews (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 148). Content mapping questions are designed to identify the issues relevant to the respondent; questions such as 'When did you first hear about matrimonial websites?' and "have you always used matrimonial websites?" were thus composed. Content mining questions instead, explore the detail within each response in order to generate an in-depth understanding from the participant's perspective: "Do you think these websites are *halal* in your opinion?" were similarly posed to each participant. It was also important that the participant feels relaxed and comfortable hence the first questions asked were to be straightforward, simple and unthreatening (Gaskell, 2000: 52). The guide also left room for follow-up questions and probes which were asked to elicit more explanation or information from respondents (see appendix 4).

In addition, a fundamental element when writing the interview guide was to uphold ethical obligations as the researcher. Gordon has observed that interviewers can "bias the responses by the tone of voice used in asking the question, by gestures and by facial expressions as well as by deviating from the required wording of the question or structuring of the answers" (1975: 151). Predominantly, there is an ethical obligation for the researcher to report on possible bias in the wording of interview questions. Also, it is recommended to report on any possible questions omitted from the interview itself (Gordon, 1975: 152). Hence, in remaining ethnically sound, questions composed in the interview guide attempted to be open and objective in the hope of not leading participants' answers.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

Having transcribed the interviews individually, the next step was to analyse the findings from the data. As one of the aims of this empirical study is to draw upon the effects of these websites on this particular diaspora, conducting a thematic analysis of the transcripts seemed the most appropriate and had also produced encouraging results from the pilot study. There are, however, other noted methods in analysing data, such as, content and discourse that are also popular forms of analysis for interview transcripts (Guest and MacQueen, 2008). Thematic analysis, unlike content analysis for instance, moves beyond the counting of words and phrases. It is used for identifying, analysing and reporting patters (themes) within a data set. It also focuses on describing and identifying "implicit and explicit ideas" from the data (Guest and MacQueen, 2008: 138). Along the same lines, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006: 4) have argued that thematic analysis is a "form of pattern recognition" within the data. This type of analysis requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher, as it is their task to identify themes, which reflect their textual data. Through coding, themes can be developed either deductively (theory driven) or inductively (data-driven).

For the purposes of this study, data-driven codes were conducted inductively, (as there has not been much prior empirical research on this subject) in order to highlight themes and relevant factors impacting traditional Islamic courting and cultural practises. Similarly, this study will use an essentialist (realist) approach of thematic analysis; this allows the researcher to theorise experiences, motivations, and meaning in a straightforward way. Whereas, thematic analysis conducted within a constructionist framework does not focus on motivation of respondent's but instead, seeks to theorise the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

There are, however, limitations in conducting a thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Critics have often associated the flexibility of thematic analysis with a lack of transparency. Another disadvantage of using this method is the "limited interpretive power" of the researcher to go beyond description if it is not guided by a theoretical or conceptual framework, which anchors the analytic claims that are made (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Yet, as Braun and Clarke (2006: 100) argue, the shortcomings attributed to thematic analysis depend more on poorly conducted analyses, or inept research questions, rather than the actual method itself. These weaknesses were, nevertheless, acknowledged prior to conducting the analysis and in order to counter these, interpretation of the data was to be consistent with the conceptual framework.

The Process

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally, reporting your analysis (2006).

Step 1: The first step involved "repeated reading" of each participant's transcripts, in an active way by searching for patterns and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 89-90).

Step 2: This phase involved the production of initial codes from the data. This helped to identify certain extracts from the transcripts that could be assessed in a meaningful way in regards to the research topics. Codes were conducted for as many potential themes and patterns found within the data.

Step 3: The third phase sorted the different codes into potential themes. Through visual representation (a thematic map), six candidate themes were created, which included several sub-themes, with data extracts relevantly coded to each theme (see appendix 5).

Step 4: Having created a set of candidate themes, the next step was to refine them. Essentially, it was found that a few overlapped with one another, and having revisited the collated extracts from the transcripts for each theme, additional data was coded within themes which had been missed in earlier coding stages.

Step 5: Once a second, more refined thematic map was produced, the final stage was to define and name the themes. Further refining of themes was conducted, in order to protect from generalizations and to avoid having too complex or diverse themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 95). Additionally, as part of the refinement process, it was important to observe whether there were any sub-themes within the main themes. Sub-themes, as Braun and Clarke note, are essentially "themes-within-a-theme" and can give structure to a particularly broad or general theme (2006: 95).

It was found that several of the original main five themes overlapped, and finally, three themes were devised, defined and named with relevant sub-themes. These included themes of 'motives', 'tradition failure' and 'drawbacks'. Before the final step of reporting findings and results from the analysis, interview transcripts were re-examined for evidence of the themes as mentioned in the final thematic analysis. This was to ensure that themes were not being produced from data taken too far out of their original context.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Theme of Motives

'Motives' was a predominant theme found in analysis of the data collected. There was an overwhelming amount of incentives referred to from participants in subscribing to matrimonial websites. These included: benefits, ownership and *Shariah* compliancy.

Moreover, there was also reference to justifications in subscribing and using these websites as a method to find a spouse. It should be noted that understanding the motives behind participant usage is an important and crucial factor in gaining a deeper insight into how cultural and traditional Islamic courting methods are being impacted.

Benefits

A sub-theme had emerged from analysis as each respondent referred to the advantages that online matrimonial websites have created for them in their search for a spouse. A majority of responses from participants identified certain attributes of online matrimonial websites (either explicitly or implicitly), which seemed to encourage them in their online search for a practising Muslim partner.

Of these benefits, a commonality in responses from both male and female participants was found which referred to how the online method has made their search easier to find a spouse:

> "It makes the process easier and quicker" (Respondent O).

Additionally, in some instances, participants stated that the search criteria listed on both Single Muslim and Pure Matrimony, made it easier to find a suitable, more ideal match:

> "These websites have definitely made it easier to find someone more compatible" (Respondent L).

> There is greater choice, and it is somewhat easier to find someone with similar goals and interests" (Respondent J).

As Gunter (2003) has noted, the Internet has enabled people to connect and communicate with others around the globe, which has had a huge influence and impact on society. Internet users have now become accustomed to receiving information at the click of a button. In this

sense, it was not surprising that the majority of respondents claimed that these online methods save time and are less of a hassle than searching for a spouse through cultural and traditional methods:

> "And it's so easy, whereas sometimes arranging meetings, going through that whole process can be difficult for families and can be a lengthy process of filtering out people who you are possibly interested in… Whereas, at least with the online matrimonial websites, you can filter people out quicker according to their profiles, so maybe it's a way of speeding things up" (Respondent B).

The above quote complements Seth and Patnayakuni's (2009) analysis of traditional customs, in particular of arranged marriages as particularly time consuming.

Single Muslim and Pure Matrimony use a similar feature found on other dating websites; search criteria. However, unlike dating websites, Single Muslim and Pure Matrimony have categories specific to Islamic practise. Also, an added feature on Pure Matrimony for instance, enables users to ask each other certain questions relating to broader issues such as the importance of pursuing a career over a family (for women), role of the husband and wife and so on. As was anticipated, analysis revealed that participants felt that these websites allowed them to filter through a larger pool/variety of potential spouses. For example:

> "They have certain criteria that you can pick and choose so you can skim through as many girls as you want" (Respondent A).

> "It certainly allowed me to separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of helping me to look at the profiles of practising Muslimahs" (Respondent D).

Individualism

Within the theme of motives, analysis revealed respondents felt that these websites awarded them with a sense of 'ownership' and 'control' over their search for a spouse. As previously mentioned, with the cultural tradition of 'arranged marriages,' family and parental involvement is dominant. Within this, second generation British Muslims can feel constraints and pressures to conform to these cultural tendencies; and even will rarely be forced by their family to marry despite going against their own criteria. Although participants interviewed had not mentioned any such extreme case examples, half of the respondents did, however, overtly refer to these cultural pressures and in these instances, matrimonial websites proved to be a tool in which respondents could attain control.

For example, respondent B had stated that he had used other approaches in finding a spouse, through "family, friends and contacts and arranged marriage avenues." However, he emphasised the difficulty with these methods:

> "But, there is a slight issues with that, because you don't know who your family are looking for, if it is someone that they want you to marry or you want. Hence, with [Single Muslim] at least you can see clearly, the profile of somebody you have in mind, so you're in control of that."

On a similar note, female participants also shared this burden. When respondent L, for instance, was asked when she first used matrimonial websites as a means to find a partner, she replied:

> "Several months ago... I was frustrated with the traditional means of finding a partner. I felt as though the prospective partners my family had in mind were much more to their liking than mine."

It became apparent through analysis that many participants felt these websites empowered them to, at least in the initial process of finding a spouse, be able to voice their opinions, independently from their families.

> "I would like an arranged marriage with as much parental input, but it has become very difficult as I don't feel my parents understand what I'm looking for" (Respondent G).
>
> "An arranged marriage I guess would have been the best option, but [my] parents' idea of a right match isn't the same as mine; basing it on caste, *Braderi* ties rather than piety, is alien to me" (Respondent D).
>
> "The real reason why we do it [subscribe to matrimonial websites] is because the parents' network is not as good in this country as it used to be and it doesn't work... They [Asian Muslims] are not happy with the normal introduction route anymore" (Respondent N).

These responses highlight the arguments put forward by Thompson (2003) in regards to the tensions between tradition and concepts of modernity and in particular, westernisation. As previously mentioned individualism is a key facet of westernisation, which has arguably been dismissed by Muslims, moderate and orthodox. In this instance, it can be implied that there is an attempt by respondents to establish a level of independence from their parents and families which reflects the notion of a 'westernized individual.' It could be argued that this online approach is perhaps indicative of a drive away from 'communal belonging,' an

important characteristic and element of Pakistani and Islamic culture as presented by Shaw (2001).

Shariah Compliant

The term '*Shariah* compliant' has become a popular phrase amongst the current Muslim generation in Britain today. This term has been widely used by Islamic institutions (notably within Islamic finance) and specifically refers to an individual act or activity that complies with the requirements as dictated in *Shariah* (Islamic Finance, 2009). This expression however, is not the same as *halal*; instead, this term refers to what is deemed acceptable in Islam, with provisos attached. Without these provisos therefore, it can lead to *haram* (unlawful) actions.

In this study, it was found that a third final motive focused on how Islamically inclined these websites were and whether these online methods adhered primarily to Islamic rules and regulations regarding gender interaction and marriage.

It was found that 12 respondents felt that these websites could be used in a lawful way, yet identified that there were dangers of other online users exploiting them for *haram* purposes. One respondent commented on how these websites, if used inappropriately, could lead to *fitna* (temptation).

> "If used with the appropriate care not to fall into *fitna* like by meeting and being alone with the girl, then yes, these websites can be used" (Respondent D).

> "I am aware that it can escalate to something less *halal*" (Respondent H).

Within the same vain, respondents clarified that these websites were Islamically allowed as they had authorisation from Muslim scholars who have deemed them acceptable and conform to the *Shariah*.

> "Some of these websites claim that they have had approval from Muslim scholars who know Islamic law better than I do. And according to them, they have given them a stamp of approval that the websites are ok" (Respondent B).

> "There's not one scholar I don't know who doesn't approve of them [the websites]. They might not necessarily think it's the best way of doing it, but they will never say its *haram*" (Respondent N).

Moreover, it seems as though second generation Pakistani Muslims are seen to place more importance on religion as the primary indicator of their identity. This echoes the argument put forward by Jacobsen in regards to the importance of faith over ethnicity among second generation Asian Muslims. It could be said that this is being displayed to some extent from these responses and that tensions between integrating in a westernized society whilst upholding Islamic values is a prominent issue for the British Muslim community.

For example, one respondent remarked:

> "I think the intention in using [Single Muslim] is *halal*, but the content must be appropriate and people must still follow the Islamic principles in courting by having a third person present if you decide to establish communication and arrange meetings for instance" (Respondent J).

> "At first, I was under the illusion that my parents were desperate to get rid of me [laughs] but I then realised that this [marriage] was an obligation upon me to complete half of my *imaan* (faith) and it became me pressuring my parents!" (Respondent F).

The above quote from respondent J reflects the importance she places on maintaining her religious obligations as a Muslim. The prioritisation placed on ensuring that these websites can be used whether that be from scholar or *ulema* approval, is the ultimate motivator in using these websites. Hence, although maintaining ownership over courting methods and personal requirements was one clear, important motive, it seems as though people are still grounded in traditional aspects of religion.

It is also interesting to note, that the majority of respondents are aware of the dangers involved with online matrimonial websites, and perhaps on a broader scale, the Internet. Issues regarding 'free mixing' between the sexes online, as raised by Muzamil H. Siddiqi seem to be highlighted in the discussion pertaining to whether these websites are conforming to the religious obligations placed upon Muslims (Larsson, 2011).

For example, respondent A stated: "Some people give you their personal email address or add you on Facebook but that's directing you away from the website and you don't want to do that […]". When asked why he did not wish to contact the potential 'match' through other websites, he replied: "It's not right. It is just me and her chatting, free mixing […] It would be me and her alone regardless of whether it is via Facebook chat or whichever."

Theme of Tradition Failure

Another recurring theme that emerged from analysis indicated a failure of traditional routes and cultural methods, when searching for a spouse. A pattern was established after each respondent was asked to discuss cultural methods they had used previously, such as arranged marriages. It was found that many had stated although this would be an ideal route to use, a few were conflicted with using this method whilst others had unpleasant experiences in the past.

Each participant interviewed was posed with the questions: 'How do you feel about arranged marriages?' and 'Are there any pressures for you to have an arranged marriage?' Focusing on the first question asked each respondent had some personal experience in pursuing the arranged marriage route.

When asked about their thoughts on arranged marriages, a few respondents appeared to be apathetic towards this process, and in some cases, almost cynical. One respondent remarked:

> "I'm not completely against the idea of an arranged marriage, but I would much prefer to be introduced properly and be given the opportunity to get to know someone, within the confines of Islam of course as marriage is a huge commitment and you cannot make that decision to marry lightly, nor can someone else decide for you" (Respondent J).

> Another respondent voiced her opposition towards the traditional practice:
> "I don't believe in arranged marriages in the traditional sense, where women are so pressured by the family to go a certain way that they can't out of shyness or fear, state their wishes and their wants" (Respondent K).

Additionally, participants had spoken about the reluctance to use this method as their parents or family members would have primary say/control over the decision-making. This aspect ties in with the sub-theme of individualism, as this could also be viewed as an added incentive for Asian Muslims to partake in matrimonial websites. However, what arguably separates the theme of tradition failure from solely being a motive, are the further comments relating to the incompatibility of traditional methods with contemporary society.

For instance, one respondent claimed that: "Traditional methods of finding a spouse, through *Braderi* or village ties are no longer applicable in a modern context. Youngsters don't feel that same connection with such ties" (Respondent D). For respondent D, there seems to be lack of understanding and perhaps sympathy towards aspects of Pakistani culture and

traditions. As previously noted, Jacobsen has noted upon the weak ties between second generation Pakistanis living in Britain, in comparison to their parents (1997). This declining relationship towards cultural bonds, arguably, is highlighted to some degree by participant responses within this theme and the sub-theme of 'individualism.'

Gender Roles

Surprisingly, two respondents referred to changes in traditional roles of men and women as a factor that has affected the ways in which British Muslims search for their potential partners. Even though gender roles was not a frequented topic in analysis, it is interesting to note how this is counterintuitive to the extensive amount of literature written on women in Islam, which suggested that this is a greatly discussed issue amongst Muslim communities (Ahmed, 1992). It is also worthy to note that both respondents were male and had raised issues concerning the changing role of women in contemporary society.

Traditionally, it is has been noted that the husband is the 'breadwinner' of the family household, whilst the wife, the core of the family, relishes in duties of motherhood and domestic chores. These roles are defined in Islam (through various *hadiths*) as author Rif'at Uthman has noted (2003). Whereas, in today's society there are a significant amount of women in the workplace and according to the respondents, the importance placed on career, for example, could negatively impact the true essence of marriage in Islam.[3]

Respondent B had commentated on the erosion of traditional values and also on what he saw as a "change in power dynamics" in the Muslim community and more specifically between husband and wife, males and females in present society.

> "And there is ambiguity over the roles of women in society in terms of their lifestyle purposes [...] 30 years ago the man was the breadwinner, he would provide, and the woman would be a house generally and bring up the kids. Whereas now, these roles have become blurred and women are expected, from a popular point of view, to work, to earn money and it's a shared responsibility to bring up the kids" (Respondent B).

The respondent then continued to argue how Muslim women are no different in this respect, further stating:

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[3] According to the latest figures published by the Office of National Statistics, the employment rate of women is over 70%, with up to 13.6million jobs filled by women in the UK, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7638056.stm [Last Consulted 20 August 2012]

"They [Muslim women] want to work and their upbringing has encouraged them to be independent and to celebrate their independence and to shun traditional roles" (Respondent B).

The emphasis placed on career, was also echoed by respondent A:

"These women delay marriage for whatever reason, like their career, which is fine, that's in their own right. But, what happens is they realise oh sugar, I'm 28, 29 now and I'm not married and in our [Pakistani] culture, once women have passed a certain age its very difficult for them to get married."

From the above quote, respondent A revealed a topic of 'age' and how it is discouraged for Pakistani women to get married at a later age. This was not anticipated in prior research on this particular diaspora and unfortunately due to time constraints and the limited scope of this study, it was not possible to pursue this line of research.

Theme of Drawbacks

The final theme to emerge from analysis related to various 'setbacks' and 'negative outcomes' experienced by respondents, in using the websites. Despite the enthusiasm and sense of empowerment felt by the majority of respondents, there was a level of doubt voiced, concerning the use of these websites in a number of ways. Firstly, there was much reference to issues regarding the reliability and trustworthiness of online users. Commentators such as Hancock, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) for instance, have published studies focusing on behavioural patterns of online users on dating websites and have also, discussed the ability for some to mislead others through making fake profiles and lying about themselves. Participants' understood this particular danger in using matrimonial websites and this is evident from responses:

"You also have to be wary because if the Internet has taught us anything we can be whoever we want to be online" (Respondent L).

"Even when you spot a good match, which for me is a practising, covering Muslimah, I cannot be certain if she is genuine, and cannot ascertain her personal history" (Respondent D).

It is also important to note that whilst a few respondents voiced their concerns regarding the reliability in using matrimonial websites, they preferred, to some degree, traditional face-to-face introductory meetings:

> "But there are certain criteria that you can only assess when meeting the person face-to-face such as, manners politeness, attitude, humility and so on… I mean you always doubt whether the person you are interested in is being entirely honest" (Respondent J).

> "It's very easy for someone to lie and create a completely fictitious profile of themselves in order to get married or swindle on. Whereas, obviously when you are meeting them face-to-face it's less likely to be a hoax" (Respondent B).

Hence, it seems as though there is still an element of hesitancy in using online methods.

Parental Disappointment

A sub-theme had also emerged within the broader theme of drawbacks, which focused on 'parental disappointment'. As observed from literature, an important tenet of Islam is listening, respecting and being kind to your parents. Likewise, this duty is also rooted in Pakistani culture. Thus, it was not particularly surprising when participants felt that by using these online websites, and gaining a degree of control, they could upset their parents. One respondent remarked:

> "In a way you are now bypassing the traditional means, your nuclear family and extended family and there is a danger in that […] it could lead to conflict with your traditional family and their values. That you're bypassing them, they might get offended and upset" (Respondent A).

Conversely, it seems as though despite a longing for individuality, participants also expressed the importance of maintaining and upholding their Islamic values (that includes listening to their parents). The dichotomy between both of these ideals, individuality and conformity to cultural and Islamic values, is represented as a struggle, and touches on broader issues of intergenerational conflicts as highlighted by authors such as Ramadan (2003).

Moreover, topics concerning interracial marriage were also a point of discussion for a few participants. For instance, respondent A had touched upon marrying a non-Pakistani, which in his opinion would cause some level of tension between him and his family: "There will be tension no doubt, especially if you marry a person who's not Pakistani and the fact that you met her on a website is a double whammy."

Likewise, respondent J commented on her parent's expectations of her marrying a Pakistani, but echoed similar concerns if she were to not: "I am aware of my parents dislike of this idea as it will be difficult for them to communicate with my future spouse and his family because they do not share the same traditional values."

Whilst, this is a hotly debated issue amongst the Pakistani community, it was interesting to note how other respondents did not mention this directly. This was interpreted to mean that perhaps for many second generation Pakistani Muslims, religious practice is perhaps prioritised first, before culture. This finding complements research on Asian Muslim diasporas, notably Jacobsen (1997), as respondents stated:

> "It is more important that he is a practicing Muslim with good character, irrespective of background or origin" (Respondent O).

> "I would rather be with a spouse who practises her religion often because she understands, than one who practices sometimes just because it is her culture" (Respondent D).

Furthermore, one respondent argued that these websites are still considered a taboo amongst the Pakistani community:

> "Currently there is a bit of a taboo feel to them, as it's a bit embarrassing to tell your friends you're subscribed to it and it is an issue you don't want to bring up with your parents" (Respondent F).

Yet, even though respondent F alluded to the issue of taboo, it is important to note that other respondents did not mention this directly. Retrospectively, respondent N spoke of the acceptance of online matrimonial websites among the Pakistani community in Britain.

> "I remember my sister's generation; it was a taboo because they got married via the Internet. It's not a taboo anymore. It has become a part of the custom of marriage in this country."

However, both respondents (F and N) were the only ones to mention how this new method of finding a spouse could be recognised as a taboo. Although only two respondents mentioned this, it was nonetheless still important to shed light on this given the extensive amount of research on prohibitions within Islamic and also Pakistani cultures (Seth and Patnayakuni, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Summary & Findings

This study aimed to achieve an in-depth understanding into the ways in which online matrimonial websites have affected traditional Islamic and cultural methods of finding a spouse.

Findings from this study complemented existing research on the impact of modernity and westernisation on Abrahamic religions, such as Islam. In particular, certain values and ideals of a western society have been seen as conflicting to Islamic principles. The argument presented by Thompson and Huntington concerning the conflict between Muslims engaging with 'individualism,' remains unchallenged, to some degree. This is supported with the theme of drawbacks, as traditional and cultural methods of finding a partner still hold a level of importance, which respondents cannot oust completely.

In regards to the Internet and new media, respondents did display a sense of understanding to the rules and Islamic boundaries that Muzammil H. Siddiqi has spoken of (Larsson, 2011). Although Siddiqi's approach towards new media and in particular, the Internet, is seen as relatively conservative, participants were aware of the potential pitfalls but did not disregard this medium. Respondents acknowledged the dangers of using online matrimonial websites in regards to gender interactions and the possibility of *fitna* occurring between users, yet, they also witnessed the benefits.

Overall, it seems as though Asian Muslims are struggling to adhere to their faith whilst maintaining a level of individuality in a western society. In maintaining a modern identity, it was found that these Muslims were not averse in using the Internet as a tool to find a spouse. In actuality, this study found that Asian Muslims are more motivated to use matrimonial websites because they are more Islamically inclined. This complements Jacobsen's work with regard to religion superseding ethnic customs to some extent (1997). Nevertheless, Muslims are adapting to the globalised and modern forms of courting but this study shows this is not ousting traditional and cultural methods. Rather, online methods have highlighted the attempt by Asian Muslims in reconciling these seemingly conflicting ideals in relation to marriage. More importantly, these websites have also revolutionised the introductory part of finding a spouse; allowing individuals to initiate contact, without, in some cases, parental acknowledgement or permission.

Limitations

This study was, however, tempered by several limitations of varying degree. In terms of methodology, critics had suggested that a thematic analysis relies too heavily on the researcher's intuition. This could be a potential weakness, although this was curtailed to some degree through regular sense checks on data and ensuring a consistent standard of applied judgement. In regards to obtaining interviews as the main method of data collection, there is also a potential weakness in trusting the credibility of responses from participants, according to their personal reference points, which could be skewed by their own unique experiences (positive and negative). Moreover, further research into areas such as 'gender roles' for example, could have been expanded on with the liberty of more time, which may have uncovered deeper insights for the benefit of analysis and evaluation.

Future Research

Recommendations for future research within this field would undoubtedly focus on a wider demographic sample of Muslims in Britain. This study specifically focused on second generation, urbanite British Pakistanis, between the ages of 25–35, and the research specifically speaks for this particular diaspora. It would be interesting, however, to research how other Muslim communities such as British Somalis or Arabs, with their own unique cultures (and sub-cultures), are handling aspects of modernity in comparison to an Indian sub-continental one. A further research suggestion would include conducting interviews with the creators of the profiled matrimonial websites themselves, i.e. Single Muslim and Pure Matrimony, which could provide an insight into their motivations and unique observations.

All in all this study has uncovered many fascinating insights and hopefully given due cause an inspiration to other researchers to undertake further investigations into some of these under-researched areas within contemporary Muslim studies.

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APPENDIX 1: Table of Respondent Sample

Respondents (Pakistani ethnicity)	Gender, Age, Occupation
A	Male, 25, Lawyer
B	Male, 29, Project Manager
C	Male, 31, IT Consultant
D	Male, 31, Lawyer
E	Male, 30, Accountant
F	Female, 25, Masters student
G	Female, 26, Pharmacist
H	Female, 26, Accountant
I	Male, 29, Teacher
J	Female, 26, Sales Assistant
K	Female, 27, Manager
L	Female, 28, Writer
M	Male, 26, Teacher
N	Male, 34, Accountant
O	Female, 29, Self-employed

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