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Diasporic virginities: social representations of virginity and identity formation amongst British Arab Muslim women

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Title: Diasporic Virginities: Social representations of virginity and constructions of identity amongst British Arab Muslim women.

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Abstract

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This study compares how practising and non-practising British Arab Muslim women position themselves in relation to representations of virginity. Overall, in this qualitative study, we found that representations of culture and religion influenced social practices and social beliefs in different ways: non-practising Muslim women felt bound by culture to remain virgins, while practising Muslim women saw it as a religious obligation but were still governed by culture regarding the consequences of engaging in premarital sex. Interestingly, some practising Muslim participants used Mut'a (a form of temporary 'marriage') to justify premarital sex. This however, did not diminish the importance of virginity in their understanding and identification as Arab women. In fact, this study found that virginity, for the British Arabs interviewed, embodied a sense of 'Arabness' in British society. Positioning themselves as virgins went beyond simply honour; it was a significant cultural symbol that secured their sense of cultural identity. In fact this cultural identity was often so powerful that it overrode their Islamic identities, prescribing particular cultural norms even if religion was seen as more 'forgiving'. As we discuss in the conclusion, this has important implications for the study of social representations and identities, particularly in relation to the complex relationship between religious and cultural identities.

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Introduction

Migrant communities often bring with them views and attitudes from their homeland influenced by their religious and cultural beliefs and pass on these expectations onto their children (Ajrouch, 1999). On occasion, these may sit in direct opposition to the views and attitudes held in their new home country. At times it seems that such religious and cultural beliefs and practices are in fact interchangeable, but, as this study shows, the relationship between religious and cultural identities is complex – sometimes they overlap, other times they pull in different directions. They are intersectional (Brah and Phoenix, 2004) in that they merge or conflict in different ways, in different relationships and contexts. Here we examine the case of British Arab Muslim women in relation to cultural and religious beliefs around one very particular and salient issue: female premarital virginity. In exploring the perceptions of virginity held amongst second-generation British Arab practising and non-practising Muslim women through social representations theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1988), this study analyses how British Arab Muslim women situate themselves in relation to the world around them, drawing on representations of religion and culture to explain their behaviour. This provides some insight to the interplay of culture and religion in a so-called 'invisible' community (Ermes, 2002).

Social identity is an element of the individual's sense of self which is manifested as a result of their knowledge and understanding in reference to their membership and level of affiliation to a group (Tajfel, 1981). Societies are patterned into numerous groups and these groups produce complex intersections (Brah & Phoenix, 2004), or hyphenated identities (Aveling & Gillespie, 2008; Hopkins, 2011; Howarth, 2011). The extent to which an individual draws on a community's social representations becomes the means by which they forge a sense of belonging, commonality and difference (Howarth, 2001). This provides not only a shared sense of identity but also develops common boundaries and beliefs to which the community adhere or may sometimes challenge . In this way, normative or dominant representations are an expression of the identities held by particular communities, even in very diverse habitus (Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson & Sammut, 2013). Through community activities and communal narratives identities are shaped and these are the symbolic resources from which a more personalised understanding of the world emerges (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Such narratives have the power to connect memories into a coherent history and knit this into the establishment of a group's social identity (Markova, 2007).

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However, contrary to some critiques (see Voelklein & Howarth, 2005), SRT does not simply focus on the role of the group in the construction of shared meanings on the basis of which they live their lives. Such an overly consensual approach would assume that communities carry homogeneous, non-conflicting representations of the world around them and that these representations are resistant to change (Rose, Efraim, Gervias, Joffe, Jovchelovitch & Morant, 1995; Howarth, Cornish & Gillespie, 2014). Rather, SRT acknowledges the role of the individual as an agent for change in the joint process of knowledge construction (Sen, Wagner & Howarth, 2014). In fact, a given community is able to simultaneously hold opposing and diverse representations (Jodelet, 1991), which can be continuously modified and renegotiated by social actors within it (Jovchelovitch, 2007). The existence of multiple and opposing representations is often understood using the concept of cognitive polyphasia (Wagner, Duveen, Verma, & Themel, 2000; Provencher, 2011). It is this which enables the co-habitation of multiple, sometimes conflicting understandings not only within a community, but within an individual as Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson & Sammut (2013) have examined in diasporic communities. The formation of a diasporic ethnic identity emerges in the space between the immigrant culture and the host culture, and religious differences complicate the picture further. This relationship is negotiated between the cultures in which both have a stake creating (or restricting) a hyphenated or hybrid identity (Fine, 2012; 1994; Wagner, Kronberger, Holtz, Nagata, Sen, & Flores-Palacios, 2010). Indeed, British Arab youth express a prominent sense of 'Arabness' which does not dilute their sense of 'Britishness' (El-Wafi, 2006; Nagel, 2002). Studies on British Muslims also highlight the use of hyphenated categories reflecting the complex multidimensional nature of their identities (Barrett, Cinnirella, Eade & Garbin, 2006; Ryan, Banfi & Kofman, 2009) that incorporate both religious and cultural elements. However, much of the research with British Muslims focuses on the British Asian population, with much less research with British Arab Muslims.

In addition, the significance of gender and sexuality in identity formation is sometimes underplayed. Women must constantly negotiate and transform the fixed boundaries of their identities recognising that their lives are defined by gender relations and gender roles (Bhachu, 1993; Brah, 1993; Dwyer, 2000; Knott & Khokher, 1993; Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012), which often provide guidelines for acceptable sexual and relational behaviours (Weeks, 1986). Studies exploring identity formation

amongst Arabs in North America highlight gendered tensions especially regarding dating and relationships (McIrvin Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban, 1999). Indeed, for many North American Arabs interpretations of what it means to be Arab or American/Canadian is often reliant on perceptions of appropriate female behaviour (Ajrouch, 1999). Within Arab society and by extension Arab diasporic communities, women are made aware of the gendered expectations and the importance of how their behaviour impacts their family's and community's reputation (Aswad, 1997). Indeed, the woman is often seen to embody the family's honour through remaining 'pure' as a virgin (Ajrouch, 1999; Al-Khayyat, 1990). While there is no agreed medical or biological definition of virginity (see Bersamin, Fisher, Grube, Hill & Walker 2007), social constructions of female virginity are often conveyed through understandings of "keeping" and "losing" virginity. This is understood through the presence or absence of the hymen and it bleeding during initial penetration. As El-Saadawi (1991) notes the family's reputation is completely reliant on the condition of the hymen which she refers to as "the very fine membrane called 'honour'" (p.25). The pressure experienced by Arab girls and women to 'keep the hymen intact' is not confined to the impermissibility of sexual encounters. Rather, any activity which may potentially break the hymen, such as taking part in certain sports or using tampons, is discouraged (Hendrickx, Denekens, Lodewijckx & Van Royen, 2002). These pressures governed by strong cultural and religious understandings of specific gender roles and by traditional values relating to female sexuality in turn impact the construction of the representations of female virginity.

The value placed on female premarital virginity is often regarded as the most important aspect differentiating *both* Arab culture *and* Islamic communities from their host culture (Eid, 2007). As a result, second-generation Arab Muslim immigrants may also see premarital virginity as a critical aspect of what makes their culture distinct. Being integrated members of their host society where sex before marriage is generally regarded as acceptable, second-generation Arab Muslim immigrants have to manage this social expectation alongside sometimes conflicting cultural and religious norms about appropriate behaviour, such as abstaining from premarital sex. Eid notes that premarital virginity is a predominantly female-specific obligation, one which is advocated by the majority of women, despite the fact that Islam specifies the importance of *both* men and women remaining virgins until marriage (Musso, Cherabi & Fanget, 2002). The decision to engage in premarital sex or not is seen to indicate to both the Arab Muslim community they belong to and the so-called 'host' society which 'side they are

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on' (Eid, 2007). Where on one hand there is the 'good', virtuous Arab Muslim girl who is respected yet bound by expectations, be they self-imposed or otherwise; on the other hand there is the 'bad' non-Arab, non-Muslim girl who is not bound by these expectations and as a result is seen as less respectable and even promiscuous in the eyes of Arab diasporic communities in the West. Naber (2006), in her study on Arab Americans, refers to this as the battle between the "Arab virgin" and the "American(ized) whore". Other studies have shown that Muslim immigrants find themselves confronting traditionally held views, changing their outlook on some issues, becoming more detached from such collective beliefs – that relate to both culture and religion, and so more individualistic (Ahmadi, 2003a, 2003b; Farahani, 2007; Shahidian, 1999) with a weakened sense of one's cultural heritage (Berry, 2011). However, as others have found (e.g., Hopkins, 2011; Howarth, et al, 2013) negotiating identity is often very complex, with different strategies used in different contexts, and that there is often a struggle between the need to belong as well acting assertively in developing a unique identity.

Furthermore, as well as the complex relationship between cultural and religious beliefs and expectations about gendered behaviours – we can see many variations within the same culture and religion. For instance, within Muslim communities there is an alternative interpretation of Islam's position on premarital relationships and sexual behaviour is *mut'a* or a temporary marriage, a concept rejected by the Sunni sect but accepted to differing degrees within the Shi'a doctrine (Walbridge, 1996). *Mut'a* is a contract between a man and an unmarried woman where the duration of the marriage is stipulated beforehand and a monetary sum is agreed upon. Conditions can be stipulated by both individuals which could include limitations to the degrees of physical contact. There is no requirement for witnesses for the union, nor for it to be officially registered, but is considered bound in the eyes of God (Haeri, 1989). Much research on *mut'a* has been within Iranian society (Haeri, 1989; Mir-Hosseini, 1994) with little research on the practice in diasporic communities in the West. Walbridge (1996), focusing on the Lebanese Shi'a community in Michigan, found that *mut'a* was practiced predominantly by men and was largely rejected by the community. The few women who admitted to being in *mut'a* relationships all gave practical and sometimes tragic explanations for the union, for example being otherwise homeless. However, in the Iranian context Haeri (1989) notes that some women use *mut'a* as a means of claiming a degree of autonomy and a sense of control in their lives, occasionally admitting to using the practice to fulfil sexual desires.

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What we can see from previous research is that there is a very close and complex relationship between cultural and religious expectations about gendered behaviours. This is very evident when examining the beliefs about virginity held in these communities in a range of contexts, as we have seen above. While it seems (from these previous studies) that religious and cultural representations of virginity are almost interchangeable, we suggest that this is often a common sense assumption that simply equates Muslim and Arab communities and imposes homogeneity. In our research we seek to examine the relationship between religious and cultural expectations through the examination of female virginity held among self-identifying British Arab Muslim women. By dividing them into two groups (practising and non-practising British Arab Muslim women) on the basis of self-defined religious observance, we explore the extent to which religion and culture drive these social representations. On the basis of this, we consider the interconnections between religion and culture on constructions of identities and gendered behaviours.

1. Research design

1.1. Participants

The sample, made up of 17 unmarried self-identifying British Arab Muslim women aged between 19 and 33, all lived in London and had been living in the UK for the whole or majority of their lives.

Eight participants belonged to the Sunni sect of Islam and nine were Shi'a. As we were keen to examine the relationship between religion and culture, we recruited Muslims with different degrees of religiosity. Eight participants considered themselves non-practising Muslims whilst nine as practising Muslims. There was considerable consensus with regards to the definition of being a practising and non-practising Muslim hence these labels were used as they were meaningful to the participants. Practising was defined as at least adhering to the basic tenets of Islam such as praying and fasting, while non-practising referred to not observing these principles. So while many felt that they were "less" Muslim in that there were non-practising, they still located themselves in relation to being Muslim. (We can see this in other religions, as some Christians and Jews define themselves as non-practising Christians or Jews.)

With regards to their Arab identity, the participants indicated to their connection to Arab countries through their parental and familial heritage. The use of the Arabic language was also identified as

intrinsic to their self-proclaimed Arab identity. All names have been changed in order to protect participants' anonymity.

1.2. Procedure

A semi structured interview technique was used. It was particularly beneficial in this study given the sensitive nature of the topic. Interviews lasted between 50 to 80 minutes.

1.3 Situating the researcher

The first author (the interviewer) identifies as a practising Muslim and wears the *hijab* and this may have limited the degree to which participants were willing to speak openly about their opinions and experiences. However, as a result of a common heritage and language, many participants felt at ease and said that they could only discuss the issues raised within this research with 'an insider' who understood their cultural and religious perspectives. Common language, Arabic and English, sustained a flow in the narration since the participants were able to switch between English and Arabic with ease throughout the interview. This forged a sense of trust, understanding, warmth and also humour, as is evident in the transcripts.

2. Data analysis and results

All interviews were voice recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using an inductive thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabling the coding frameworks to develop from the data rather than from any imposed expectations (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). As the level of religiosity was a point of comparison, the transcripts of practising participants were coded separately from those of non-practising participants. Although similar general themes emerged, certain themes were distinct enough for the two groups of data to be analysed separately. Four overarching themes emerge: 'constructing identity, 'cultural pressures and expectations', 'honour' and 'dating boundaries'. Within these themes there are some differences between the Practising Muslim and Non-practising Muslim group most evidently for the theme 'dating boundaries'. The second author examined the analysis and coding framed to ensure that the analysis was systematic, reliable and thorough.

2.1. Constructing identity

All respondents discussed issues of positioning in relation to representations of religion and culture and, parental expectations.

2.1.1. Formulating own identity. All our participants acknowledged their 'Arabness', and saw it as an integral part of their identity. This however did not conflict or reduce their sense of 'Britishness' and resulted in many participants hyphenating their identities to encompass their sense of self. Sonia (29, practising) explains *"it's okay to identify myself as British without having to leave other parts of my identity like my Tunisian heritage".*

Religion plays a fundamental part in identity construction of practising Muslim participants, with many claiming it to be the most important aspect on which their *"whole life is based"* (Ayah, 20, practising). Some non-practising Muslim participants acknowledge the cultural role Islam plays in their lives, often engaging in *"social and cultural obligations during certain important Islamic occasions"* (Nadine, 24, non-practising) such as entertaining guests after sunset during Ramadan.

2.1.2. Parental influences. All the participants describe their parents as having a large influence on the importance placed on culture within constructions of identity. A large part of the significance of family life is language as *"speaking Arabic is really important"* (Razan, 21, non-practising) because it is one of the foundations for creating an Arab identity. For participants with religiously practising parents it was evident that religious and cultural expectations merged in their upbringing and subsequently affecting how they behave within the social sphere, be that within the Arab community or in the wider British society.

The extent to which participants' parents impose Arab culture and/or religion onto their daughters is closely linked to their perceptions of Western society. By stressing the importance of Arab culture, parents may juxtapose its values with that of British culture and society. Participants comment that although their parents acknowledge good elements within British culture and society, they largely are of the view that the values often oppose Arab culture and/or Islam. This especially comes into play regarding dating and the perceived openness and acceptability of premarital sex where the belief is that their daughters will be *"corrupted by the society"* (Neveen, 28, practising). As a result, many

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participants give this as an explanation as to why parents often restrict the freedom of their daughters. Nevertheless, participants did not regard these imposed restrictions in a purely negative light or with any sense of animosity. Indeed as Razan (21, non-practising) points out *"people see it as coming down hard and they see it as crazy Arabs living in the dark ages but really their intentions are good, they're trying to protect us."*

2.2. Cultural pressures and expectations

Parental influence was related to broader cultural expectations about marriage and 'the need to bleed'.

2.2.1.The ideal woman for marriage. One of the main cultural expectations these British Arab women face is to conform to being the ideal woman for marriage. The majority of the women interviewed accept marriage as inevitable, particularly after the *"socially accepted age"* (Alia, 19, non-practising) which is often *"once they've graduated"* (Sonia, 29, practising). This was not seen as necessarily simply an imposed expectation but rather something they all hope for themselves. Women who have passed the expected age and are not yet married are viewed with suspicion. All participants agree unequivocally that female premarital virginity is a requirement and in rationalising why a woman is not yet married, the community often assumes that it is linked to inappropriate sexual activity. Alia (19, non-practising) recalls her mother's comments about a 35-years-old Arab woman whose unmarried status was assumed to be because *"when she was younger she mucked about with a couple of guys and word got round and now she's viewed as 'used goods'."* Regardless of age, a woman's conduct with men contributes significantly towards her image and marriage prospects. Therefore she is required to maintain the perfect "good girl" image by, for example, not being *"too flirtatious"* or dressing *"suggestive"* (Heba, 25, non-practising).

2.2.2. The need to bleed. Proof of virginity on the wedding night was highlighted as a major pressure experienced by these British Arab women. The participants describe the traditional Arab custom of displaying the blood-stained wedding night bed sheet as proof of the female's virginity. As Maryam (33, non-practising) notes *"you've got to wave 'the Japanese flag' out the window* [[…]] *it's the proof that you've been a virtuous girl".*

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Almost half of the participants assume that during the first time a female has sexual intercourse she would bleed. To them this is 'the proof' of her virginity. The remaining participants are aware that bleeding during the first sexual encounter may not happen and that *"the hymen's condition isn't a reliable indicator of whether she's lost her virginity or not"* (Sonia, 29, practising). However, this knowledge does not alleviate the pressures they face. Huda (32, non-practising) expresses fear of not bleeding in case her future husband expects her to do so or is unaware that it is not biologically necessary: *"I know you don't necessarily have to bleed, biologically, but I'd be scared if I don't in case my husband doesn't know that I don't have to bleed. What if he thinks I'm not a virgin because of his lack of knowledge, then what?"*

This fear of not bleeding has led to women finding alternative methods such as using *"gelatine capsule*[s] *with fake blood"* (Sonia, 29, practising) or women resorting to *"cutting themselves deliberately"* (Maryam, 33, non-practising) to ensure the bloodstain is accomplished. Some participants also note the rise of doctors offering hymen reconstruction surgery as a viable means of 'restoring' a female's virginity. This need to bleed is perpetuated to the extent that although the majority of participants express that a woman remains a virgin if she has not had sex, they also recognise that a woman may 'break' her hymen and 'lose' her virginity by taking part in certain physical activities such as riding a bike and therefore avoid them.

2.3. Honour.

All participants discussed the importance of honour or reputation.

2.3.1. Reputation. Reputation within the community influences the way in which premarital sex is viewed. The participants assert that *"it is important for Arab girls to preserve their reputation, as amongst society this is a reflection of the girl's family and her upbringing"* (Reem, 23, practising). Any actions, such as sex outside marriage, which will tarnish the family's standing within the community must not be engaged in. Nadine (24, non-practising) explains *"it brings such shame on the family if it's found out. It's nothing to be proud of."* Thus, the family's reputation is closely associated with the female's personal reputation because she is seen to carry *"the reputation of the family on her shoulders"* (Neveen, 28, practising). Furthermore, the reputation of the family is, in effect, an extension of her own

as the woman's identity is never dissociated from that of her family. The individual and the familial identity become synonymous. Alia (19, non-practising) elaborates:

"You identify someone as part of someone's family. Like my uncles would never say "This is {Alia}", they would say like "This is {father}'s daughter".".

Within this family context, marriage is a central recurring issue. The participants repeatedly refer to the fact that they would *"never be able to get married"* (Inas, 20, practising), or would have great difficultly marrying as consequence of not remaining virgins. Engaging in premarital sex is too large a *"risk"* (Nadine, 24, non-practising) given the reputational damage that would occur if found out. This reputational damage is not limited to premarital sex however. Participants mention that any behaviour which may be regarded as suspicious by the community, even platonic friendships with men (as seen in the quote below), could ruin a woman's reputation resulting in her being shunned from the community and/or by their family. Culture and its rules thus define the boundaries for women.

"It's always in the back of my head like even if I go out with guy friends I'm almost paranoid that one of my parent's friends will see me and assume I'm dating them when I'm not." (Heba, 25, non-practising).

Although none of the women interviewed had been actually shunned in this way (only two admitted to not being virgins, asserting this remains secret from both friends and family), some had heard stories of women in their community being *"insulted and shunned […] for any little thing"* (Alia, 19, non-practising). Some saw this as being the only valid action to be taken by the family to restore the family's reputation within the community. Indeed, despite no longer being virgins, the two non-virgins (both of whom describe themselves practising Muslims) acknowledged that their conduct goes beyond affecting their own standing within the community and indeed has ramifications for their siblings and extended family, affecting the 'marriagability' of their female relatives, whose conduct will also be called into question: *"I know that if anyone ever finds out it would be really bad not just for my sisters, but for all the girls in the family. My older sister's engagement could even be called off not because of anything she did, but because of what I have done"* (Neveen, 28, practising).

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All the participants highlight that the concept of honour and how it dictates the actions of a female is purely cultural, with the practising group stressing that it is not linked to religion. Interestingly, the notion of reputation and carrying the family honour is not viewed as a necessarily daunting task. Rather, it is seen as *"an important aspect of Arab culture"* (Heba, 25, non-practising) particularly in British society as it shows that the woman is *"upholding the Arab tradition and upholding* [.] *family honour"* (Heba, 25, non-practising). Virginity becomes such an intrinsic part of a negotiated diasporic cultural identity that control of sexuality is not seen as a 'daunting' task but instead becomes an identity marker. As Heba (25, non-practising) points out, *"I think this concept of honour is something that is beautiful that comes from our Arab culture"*.

2.4. Dating boundaries

We have already seen that dating and relationships are closely tied with representations of premarital virginity amongst British Arab women. However, in this theme, unlike the previous themes, there are significant differences between the practising and non-practising women. Among the practising Muslim group, six out of the nine had been or are currently in a relationship. Only three of the non-practising Muslim group (a total of eight) had been or are currently in relationships. While these numbers are too small to make any claims from this, what is interesting that it is practising women who used religious discourses to justify premarital sexual relationships.

2.4.1. Sexual relationships dating. Justifications for being in sexual relationships were only given by practising Muslim participants and these related to religious validations to reduce the dissonance. These participants mention the concept of *mut'a* as a way in which sexual relationships can be formed and are *'acceptable in the eyes of God"* (Neveen, 28, practising). This element is crucial to them as practising Muslims. It is important to note that despite *mut'a* being purely a Shi'a Islamic concept, some participants who identified as Shi'a dismiss *mut'a* altogether. Maysa (22, practising) explains *"it's not for every person who wants a relationship with someone… the whole concept I dislike"*. Another important point is that the Shi'a participants who disapprove of the practise see it as something that benefits men, not women, saying that a Shi'a woman would not even entertain the idea of entering a *mut'a* relationship.

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2.4.2. Opinions and discourses on sex and relationships. Other than those who accept *mut'a* as legitimate in the Islamic context, the remaining practising Muslim participants, belonging to both the Sunni and Shi'a sects, state premarital sex as unequivocally Islamically impermissible or *"haram"* (Rasha, 23, practising). Despite this however, these participants stress a degree of choice explaining that the actions of an individual are *"between you and God"* (Ayah, 20, practising). The concept of repentance is associated with the idea that *"everyone has done mistakes in their lives"* (Ayah, 20, practising). Therefore engaging in premarital sex is interpreted as a 'mistake' thus forgiveness from God is a key concept within this understanding.

Although religion plays an important role in the way the practising Muslim participants view premarital sex, they acknowledge that culture has more influence. As Reem (23, practising) states:

> *"it is not necessarily due to religious reasons that premarital relations are prohibited in our culture, because if that was the case Islamic rules will be applicable to both sexes. However it is only due to cultural reasons that the issue of premarital physical relations for girls is a definite no go".*

It is for this reason that relationships and sex are not discussed in the general sense and a level of secrecy is maintained even by those who use *mut'a* as a means of engaging in a relationship. As highlighted by Neveen (28, practising), *"some of my friends don't know I have one* [a boyfriend] *and they definitely have no idea what I get up to with him. I guess they wouldn't see me as very Arab and I guess in this case I'm not"*

Unlike the practising Muslim participants, there is more conviction amongst the non-practising Muslim participants towards never engaging in sex outside of marriage. Many refer to the action and discussion of it as '*eib'*, the Arabic word for shameful and disgraceful but meaning something much more condemning than the translation suggests. As Nadine (24, non-practising) states, *"I regard having sex before marriage as a definite no-no. Culturally it's unacceptable. It's* eib. *A girl who is not a virgin, I mean what was she thinking to be honest?!".*

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2.4.3. Non-sexual relationship dating. All the practising Muslim participants accept dating for the purpose of marriage. It is important to stress here that 'dating' does not refer to 'dating' in the western sense, rather, clear boundaries are set by the participants as acceptable levels of intimacy. These are influenced by their religious and cultural viewpoints. Arij (20, practising) explains that for her *"dating entails meeting up with a person in a public place and the aim to is get to know the person* [[…]] *the 'dating' phase develops into a 'relationship' with the long-term aim, i.e. marriage"*.

Amongst the non-practising participants, entering into relationships is only ever contemplated on the condition of getting to know someone for the purpose of marriage. Dating without the potentiality of marriage is seen as *"a waste of time"* (Maryam, 33, non-practising) and participants often stressed the importance of making this intention clear from the outset. Nadine (24, non-practising) describes that she would never consider dating someone without her parents' knowledge, rather she would date *"someone who is known to them"*. She goes on to state that they *"would have no physical contact"* limiting their physical relationship to a handshake and nothing more. Heba (25, non-practising) however has different personal limits explaining that she *"would probably let him kiss* [her]*"* justifying her boundaries by acknowledging how 'normal' it is in British society. Nevertheless she does assert that this would only happen after she had *"learnt to trust him"*. This shows that there is an element of uncertainty in her willingness to be intimate in order to ensure that the man is serious about the prospect of marrying her.

3. Discussion and conclusions: re-negotiating gendered identities

The first act of sexual intercourse is commonly considered significant within many cultures, and extremely symbolic for women. The occasion is at times seen as the end of innocence, integrity, or purity, and the sexualisation of the girl. Consistent with literature on the topic of virginity (Ajrouch, 1999; Eid, 2007; Hendrickx et al. 2002; McIrvin Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban, 1999; Naber, 2006), the British Arab women interviewed here hold strong cultural and religious representations of female premarital virginity. These views are held in the context of their understanding of gender roles and in particular, marriage, which women must enter as 'undamaged'. Marriage to a man is the culturally

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defined ultimate destiny for women. The notion of being anything other than a heterosexual female was not brought up by any of the participants and thus was not explored in this study.

In stressing the importance of the virgin, all participants highlight the perceived interrelationship between age and virginity. As a woman becomes older and remains unmarried she becomes morally suspect. It is often assumed that this is because she is no longer a virgin and her reluctance to marry is due to the fact that she would not bleed on the wedding night and prove the rumours to be true. In this way, cultural and religious norms fuel the eagerness of these British Arab women to marry as a means of proving their chastity and dispelling any potential rumours which would in turn dishonour their family's reputation. These narratives within the gossip are important in keeping certain representations and expectations alive. Indeed, as Jovchelovitch (2007) notes, "it is by telling stories that social knowledge comes into life" (p.82). In this case, it is often through gossip that the topic of loss of virginity is broached and through these narratives the cultural representations that a woman must remain a virgin is dictated. In this way, narratives become a transcendent guide in the ritual of preservation and continuity of culture.

Practising participants saw sex outside marriage as *haram* (religiously prohibited) for both men and women, while the non-practising group see it as *'eib* (shameful). These differences in terminology when referring to premarital sex highlight the important variation in the way in which sex before marriage is perceived by the two groups. Where the vast majority of the practising – more religious - group understand the impermissibility of sex before marriage through their religious interpretations, the non-practising – less religious - group understand it through culture. However, culture continues to play a significant role in the perceptions of the practising group, although these participants deem culture to be hypocritical in terms of premarital virginity being imposed on and expected from females and not males. Cultural expectations are so strong that they seem to dictate the participants' behaviour. In fact, often, culturally expected values and behaviours triumph over religion. This is emphasised further in that although the majority of the practising group see premarital sex before marriage as *haram*, the repercussions of 'losing' one's virginity outside of marriage are not processed through a religious lens but through a cultural one; being shunned by family and community as opposed to facing the 'wrath of God'. To them, God is forgiving, and once having repented a person should not be judged on their past

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sins. However culturally this is not the case. Once a woman is found out to have engaged in premarital sex, she will then be continuously judged and treated as a pariah for the remainder of her life. Hence while there is a close connection between religious and cultural expectations, there are some differences.

Interestingly, some practising participants use religious validations to justify engaging in premarital sex through the concept of *mut'a*. Nevertheless, those who engage in *mut'a* do so secretly, aware that the Arab Muslim community rejects *mut'a* from a cultural standpoint, regarding it as religiously legalised prostitution. Once again religion conflicts with culture and it is culture that fixes boundaries. This highlights the delicate interaction between individual values and those held by the community. By engaging in *mut'a*, participants attempt to break culturally bound restrictions to participate in dating relationships that would be deemed 'normal' in British society. Rejecting the representations held by the community highlights the agency of the individual in their attempt to reconstruct social representations of appropriate gendered behaviours. Indeed, social representations are in constant transformation and change (László, Ferenczhalmy, & Szalai, 2010), as communities, particularly diasporic communities, are in movement (Howarth, Wagner, et al, 2013), undergoing the natural transformation of ideas and representations through time and space (Giddens, 1991), the process of potential change is amplified by the perceived polarisation of some of the values of their own culture and that of their host country (Howarth, Campbell, Cornish, Franks, Garcia-Lorenzo, Gillespie, Gleibs, Goncalves-Portelinha, Jovchelovitch, Lahlou, Mannell, Reader & Tennant, 2013).

Identity impacts the openness of an individual to other forms of social representation (Duveen, 2001), thus in having been exposed to dating in British society and seeing themselves as part of this society, the participants see dating as 'normal'. In positioning themselves within these two cultures, they then engage in dating relationships but only on the basis that it would lead to marriage and impose personal boundaries as to what dating entails. Marriage validates the act of entering into a relationship and setting boundaries distinguishes them from the wider society's interpretation of dating. There exists a mosaic of views with regards to dating boundaries amongst participants, from no physical contact to engaging in 'full' sex itself. In fact, differing views also coexist within the individual participant with many stating that although they cannot envision ever engaging in premarital sex and repeatedly emphasise the unlikelihood of it ever happening, some do say that they cannot unequivocally state that they never

would, providing a potential space for change and resistant representations (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). However, engaging in premarital sex would mean a transgression in which they would no longer be considered 'Arab girls'. Thus, remaining a virgin becomes a means of preserving their Arab culture, especially in view of what their parents perceive as the 'sexually lax' British society in which they live. There is therefore no question of abandoning the importance of premarital virginity, for in doing so not only would their honour be destroyed, but their 'Arabness' would be endangered, destabilising their own constructions of identity. Thus virginity in the British Arab context becomes an integral social marker of 'Arabness' and a means of harnessing their Arab identity in a predominantly non-Arab society. Even the participants who justified engaging in sex through their Islamic understandings prescribed to the idea that virginity constituted a large part of the Arab woman's identity and thus thought of themselves as less Arab. Here we have seen how representations of culture and religion interconnect in ways that support very different social practices. In diasporic communities, certain social practices are seen as particularly integral to the preservation of a cultural identity and thus become crucial for the maintenance of certain cultural and religious identities.

While women's rights movements have highlighted the historical and cultural specificities of gendered inequalities for some decades (Cutrufelli, 1983), issues relating to religious differences have remained largely under-researched (Bracke, 2008), particularly with regard to the differences within and across Muslim communities. Debates around gendered inequalities are complex and requires an intersectional nuanced analysis. For instance, the data show that despite the majority of practising and non-practising participants acknowledging that preservation of female virginity alone was a cultural expectation, they did not want to be simply seen and pitied as victims of a patriarchal order, and in fact the majority actively advocated it. Nevertheless, increasing exposure to competing beliefs and resistant representations through relationships in the networks and institutions of (British) society generally will create an ever increasing gap between real and expected behaviour. The participants have no problem defining 'Britishness' quite inclusively – and in ways that allow them to be British – *and* Arab, *and* Muslim. Thus being British does not translate into ignoring other aspects of their identity. The fact that many participants were open to dating, albeit for the purpose of marriage and with strict personally enforced boundaries, is evidence of them selectively choosing a mixture of values and representations from the different cultures to which they affiliate.

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In this way, identity and the social representations which accompany them are fluid and are subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation by members of the group who act as agents of change. Indeed, participants are not passively engaging in retaining their 'Arabness' or 'Muslimness' nor immersing themselves completely in their 'Britishness' but demonstrate the agency to challenge the cultural moral order expected of them as British and Arab and Muslim women. In doing so, these women carve out new, modified representations which reflect all aspects of their multifaceted identities, none of which sit in direct opposition to one another (see also Hopkins, 2011). These help them to make sense of the world around them and support their positioning as British Arab Muslims. They echo the feeling that a woman who is a virgin does what she does not for power or desire to 'fit in' (Woodman, 1988), but because that is her freedom, her choice being exercised when she is precariously poised at the hyphen between religious and cultural expectations.

Concepts such as virginity, honour, premarital sex are meta-narratives, which go beyond any supposedly literal meanings in everyday life and are mediators of societal thinking. Different religiously and culturally constructed conceptualisations determine social positioning and are of particular significance in the case of hyphenated identities. In fact there are social representations of almost all socially significant concepts and these representations are multilayered and differently driven as we see in this study. This has important implications for the study of social representations and identities, particularly in relation to the complex relationship between religious and cultural identities. We have seen that the research highlights the complex ways in which religious as well as cultural expectations inform social practices, interconnect and are re-negotiated in diasporic communities. It shows the creative ways in which the resistant and dynamic process of identity transforms cultural and religious expectations and creates a new, more hyphenated form of identity. It has also shown that representations are not concrete constructs, rather they have the constant potential for change and that every individual can be an agent of these changes. Therefore, a thorough social representations approach needs to holistically examine the interconnections between societal, cultural and religiously prescribed everyday behaviour especially in the context of identity- in- transition where individuals are agents of social change. This is of particular relevance since hyphenated identities are constantly in a state of flux, adjusting and accommodating and making sense of a hybrid culture. Most significantly, we see that we should not simply discuss 'social'

identities and 'social' representations – but develop a nuanced analysis of the role of culture, religion, gender and sexuality in constructions of identity. We hope that this modest study represents one small step in that direction. Culture is often viewed as dynamic, fluid and flexible. In contrast, generally, religion, especially those which are Religions of the Book such as Abrahamic religions, are perceived as rigid. This is the normal discourse in existing discussions. A new insight which is clearly brought upfront in this study is: that culture is more restrictive in many cases than religion. Religion was perceived as an act 'between you and God' and gave space for mistakes, repentance and forgiveness but culture was seen as normative and unforgiving. Culture and its rules thus define the boundaries. Being shunned by family and community is perceived as more frightening than facing the 'wrath of God'. The prescriptive nature of culture as opposed to flexible religion is a significant finding. Furthermore, we hope to have shown that it is all too easy to equate culture and religion in discussion of Muslim communities, particularly Muslim communities in Europe for example. In the world in which we live today, there is an increasing need to carefully examine the intersection of culture and religion in constructions of identity, forms of mobilisation, obstacles to integration, intergroup relations and our understanding of positive social and political change. To assist with these ambitions, we suggest, social representations theory needs to engage with the politics of change.

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