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Identity Construction, Belonging, and Community: A case study of queer Muslims in the United Kingdom

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A case study of queer Muslims in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper examines queer Muslim identity in the UK through an analysis of qualitative research conducted during the summer of 2018. It explores the sources and mental health consequences of identity conflict—the belief that one’s identities are incompatible. Then, it presents methods participants employed to resolve internal conflict between queer and Muslim identities. Finally, it investigates the role of support groups and networks specifically targeted towards queer Muslims. This study positions its findings within the context of existing research on queer-Muslim identity and literature on citizenship studies and postcolonial studies. It theorizes that targeted support groups and networks can simultaneously act as ethnoreligious spaces and queer spaces, giving them the ability to create new forms of queer Muslim citizenship within the spaces they occupy, alternative to hegemonic conditions for acceptance. It argues that targeted support groups and networks may also encourage identity integration and improve the psychological well-being of queer Muslims.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Queer Muslims inhabit a politicized identity crossroads. On one hand, Muslims and those perceived as Muslim face an increasing wave of bigotry in North America and Europe, manifested in the transnational right wing's string of victories in recent years.¹ A racialized Muslim, immigrant *other* has been central to the justification of extremist positions, such as Donald Trump's and Geert Wilders' proposed "Muslim bans" and Marine Le Pen's proposed moratorium on both illegal and legal immigration. While, at present, these particular proposals have not been implemented, the mainstreaming of racist, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant discourses and policies in the political sphere has affected the everyday lives of visible minorities across the "West," with reported race- and faith-based hate crimes increasing by 23 percent across the UK in the eleven months following the EU Referendum (*The Independent* 7 July 2017).

In addition to these obstacles, queer Muslims must often navigate marginalization and rejection from their ethnoreligious social groups. An analysis of the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles found that 58 percent of black and South Asian respondents believed that same-sex relationships were "always wrong," while 12 percent of white participants agreed (Watt and Elliot 2017). Religiosity also predicted acceptance of homosexuality: 60 percent of those who attended religious services weekly responded that same-sex relationships were "always wrong," compared with only 11 percent of those who did not identify as religious (Watt and Elliot 2017).

While legal obstacles still exist for queer people in the UK—for example, non-binary gender identities are not recognized in UK law (*The Independent* 17 Sep. 2015)—major legislative wins have been achieved within the last several decades² and much

¹ In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU and Donald Trump won the United States Electoral College. Shortly thereafter, the *Front national's* (FN) Marine Le Pen was voted into the *second tour* of France's 2017 presidential election and Geert Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) reached second place in the Netherlands' 2017 general election. Most recently, two parties linked to Nazism, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) and *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), have made major gains in Austria and Germany, respectively.

² Legal victories include marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples, the right to serve openly in the military, and the possibility of changing one's legal gender. Discrimination protections have also been put in place requiring equal treatment in employment and in public

of the focus has shifted to issues such as economic equality and social acceptance. However, much like anti-Muslim bigotry, discriminatory attitudes and behavior on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) can manifest in violence. A study conducted in the UK found that, over the twelve months prior to being surveyed, 16 percent of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals and 41 percent of transgender people had experienced an SOGI-based hate crime (Stonewall 2017).

Those with intersecting queer and Muslim identities may experience exclusion nationally and locally, from the media and in the family, resulting in a multi-tiered rejection, leading to isolation. With this in mind, I aim to add to emergent literature on the intersection of Muslim and queer identities. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I study targeted support groups and networks' influence on the construction and integration of identities. To my knowledge, there have been no qualitative studies on queer Muslims with a particular focus on the impact of targeted communities on identity. I explore the following questions to approach this topic:

1. What processes are involved in the construction of queer Muslim identities in the UK? And how does one become a “good” queer Muslim citizen?
2. What strategies do queer Muslims employ to resolve identity conflict and eventually integrate identities that are often pitted against each other in both religious and political hegemonic national and transnational discourses? And in this vein, how might an individual's queer identity affect their Muslim identity and their belief in or practice of Islam?
3. What is the potential of targeted support groups and networks to act as a resource for queer Muslims? In other words, how might community affect the construction and integration of identities? And, what do targeted support groups and networks offer that more general groups do not?

The value of this research lies in its potential to illuminate methods of improving the psychological well-being of marginalized people through community. It may also increase awareness of the existence and voices of queer Muslims.

and private services, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, or transgender status (UK Parliament 2010).

I begin with a brief review of relevant literature (Chapter 2). This includes an explanation and theoretical rationalization of the researcher's approach to gender and sexuality. The literature review also draws on pertinent analytical concepts to come out of queer studies, postcolonial studies, and social psychology, such as sexual citizenship, homonationalism, hybridity, and identity integration. The following section (Chapter 3) lays out the methodological approach taken to analyze and collect data. This chapter also goes over recruitment, participant demographics, and interview questions and structure. The next three chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) present and analyze the research findings, reflecting the themes and order of the three sets of research questions outlined above. Then, in the concluding chapter (Chapter 7), I reflect more broadly on my findings and relate them to the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. Finally, I present suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section situates my research within existing theoretical frameworks and case studies. Firstly, I explain my approach to gender and sexuality. Secondly, I review literature on the concept of sexual citizenship. Then, I go over the notion of hybridity and its relevance to my research. Finally, I present work on identity integration and community as it relates to queer Muslims.

2.a. Gender and Sexuality

This paper views gender as a social construct. Butler (1990: 33) argues that gender is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” This destabilizes the notion that categories of “men” and “women” are inextricably connected to biological sex, while simultaneously problematizing hegemonic conceptualizations of gender. Butler challenges essentializing views of gender, while taking into account the fundamental role that socially prescribed gender norms play in every individual’s formative experiences and performative habits. In this context, transgender and non-binary people can be simply understood as individuals whose gender identity does not correspond with their assigned gender at birth. On the other hand, cisgender men and women identify with the gender assigned to them at birth.

In addition to its Butlerian approach to gender, this paper views sexuality through a Foucauldian lens. Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976) provided the foundational framework for queer theory, with works by Butler (1990, 1993), Sedgwick (1990), de Lauretis (1991), and Rubin (1993) building upon the notion that sexual identities are socially constructed.

While accepted terms to refer to those with non-normative sexual or gender identities vary across academic disciplines and activist circles due to practicalities and politics,³ I choose to use the term *queer* throughout this paper. The reasoning for this is rooted in the work of queer theorists and is threefold:

³ Acronyms like LGBT, GLBT, LGBT+, LGBTQ, and LGBTQIA are common. For example, the terms MSM (men who have sex with men) and WSW (women who have sex with women) are commonly used in health research. In that case, it is necessary to categorize individuals based on activity, rather than identity, as sexual behavior may preclude certain health risks.

1. “Queer” acts as an umbrella term for individuals with non-normative sexual or gender identities, without delineating, privileging, or excluding any particular sub-category.
2. Terms such as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgender” can be restricting and may reproduce heteronormative conceptualizations of binary gender. “Queer,” on the other hand, recognizes the fluidity of sexual and gender identities.
3. “Queer” acknowledges past and present discrimination, as it was—and is still—used pejoratively. Thus, its usage in this paper reclaims the term.

Paradoxically, “queer” might be understood not only as an identity, but also as a political critique of sexual and gender identity categories themselves and, by extension, of identity categories on the whole.

2.b. Sexual Citizenship

In the context of these understandings of sexuality and gender, the concept of sexual citizenship, or intimate citizenship, looks at the relationship between queerness and the state. Political and social events following the Cold War led to a reevaluation of traditional notions of citizenship, with scholars such as Lister (1997), Voet (1998), and Siim (2000) criticizing the privileging of the male subject. Others noted the lack of attention traditionally paid to ethnicity and race (Taylor 1989; Alexander 1994). Beginning with Evans (1993), sexual citizenship *queers* citizenship studies. It looks at access to rights—in primarily Western contexts—such as sexual rights, marriage rights (Acosta 2011), and adoption rights (Ryan-Flood 2009). Other work on sexual citizenship has explored the role of access to participation in consumer society, with Bell and Bennie (2000: 96) arguing that, “the power that queer citizens enjoy is largely dependent on access to capital and credit.”

While it is important to study lack of access to rights and the role of capital, Richardson (2017) identifies lacunae in sexual citizenship studies, suggesting that further research is needed in the areas of citizen responsibility and obligation. Smith (1994) theorizes that in order to maintain certain rights, “good homosexual” citizens are legally and socially obligated to confine themselves to the private sphere. Richardson (2000: 269) expands upon this idea, asking:

When demands are centred upon *public* recognition of lesbian and gay relationships and identities, the question that arises is what are the sorts of obligations that are concomitant on the recognition of such rights? Who or what, in this political context, will be representative of responsible/good and irresponsible/bad lesbian citizenship? (Emphasis in original)

My findings both support Smith's analysis and offer a preliminary response to Richardson's questions.

The space that my participants occupy in the UK—as Muslims and (mostly) ethnic minorities—may also be analyzed through the strand of sexual citizenship studies that examines the relationship between sexuality and nationalist discourses. Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) proposes the concept of *homonationalism*, wherein Western nationalist discourses intentionally link the acceptance and promotion of queer rights to the national imaginary. This strategy may be used to brand non-Western countries as intolerant and “backward” in order to justify interventionism and racist or anti-Muslim domestic policy. In this paper, I analyze my participants' identity formations within the context of homonationalist anti-Muslim discourses present in the UK.

2.c. Hybridity and Hybrid Spaces

The next concept presented in this literature review comes out of postcolonial theory. Prominent works from scholars, such as Gilroy (1993), Bhabha (1994), Young (1995), and Hall (1996) in the 1990s theorized the notion of *hybridity*. They problematized representations of formerly colonized peoples and acknowledged the power relations at stake when marginalized groups are “spoken for.” Recognizing that representation and cultural production are both inherently *expressive* and *constitutive*, hybridity asserts the value in instances of self-representation of historically colonized peoples. The formerly *spoken for* take control of the narrative, combining elements of colonizer and colonized “cultures.” Bhabha (1994: 41) explains that in the hybrid moment “the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One [...] nor the Other [...] but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both” (emphasis in original). These new

transcultural forms challenge hegemony and colonial discourses by destabilizing notions of fixed cultural boundaries⁴.

In my research, this dimension of hybridity is relevant to support groups' public discourse. The groups I observed may be read as hybrid spaces that produce representations of British (primarily South Asian) Muslims on their websites and newsletters and during events involving the public, such as their presence at Pride marches. I examine decisions on language and imagery in these contexts. With the history of British colonization of South Asia and majority-Muslim countries in mind, this self-representation may be read as instances of the subaltern speaking, or *attempting* to speak, à la Spivak (1988). I extend this notion beyond ethnic and religious identities, looking additionally at self-representation of British-Muslim-Asian queerness.

2.d. Queer Muslim Identity Integration

Qualitative studies on queer Muslim identity in the United States and Canada (Minwalla *et al.* 2006), France (Provencher 2011, 2013), and the United Kingdom (Yip 2005; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010, 2012; Jaspal and Siraj 2011; Jaspal 2015) have filled a significant gap in the literature in recent years. This research has focused on issues and concepts tangential to the present study, such as interpretations of Islam, universal citizenship, performativity, internal processes of reconciliation, and the “coming out” experience.

A particularly relevant example is Jaspal and Cinnirella's (2012) qualitative sociopsychological work on young British Muslim gay men of Pakistani backgrounds. Specifically, the researchers examined the effect of gay affirmative social contexts and relations with other gay men on identity integration—the belief that one's identities are compatible. They noted potential benefits, explaining:

[Gay affirmative social contexts] may allow individuals temporary social and psychological shielding from negative social representations of homosexuality, which are prevalent in their heteronormative ethnoreligious contexts. Exposure to positive representations disseminated in these contexts is likely to benefit self-esteem. (220)

Despite this potential benefit, Jaspal and Cinnirella note that potential anti-Muslim prejudice within such contexts may position gay Muslims as “ingroup black sheep,”

⁴ It is important to note criticisms of this concept. Scholars such as Thomas (1996) assert that hybridity is essentializing, as it may assume a pre-colonial cultural purity.

undermining attempts to seek belonging. Discrimination and *othering* within gay affirmative social contexts can extend beyond religious affiliation, and into ethnicity and color. Minwalla *et al.* (2006: 121) note, “as one integrates a gay identity, color dynamics and the whiteness of gay culture can become an issue of concern.” In this vein, Jaspal and Cinnirella conclude that psychological well-being among their cohort might be improved through a change in social representations of (1) homosexuality in ethnoreligious spaces and of (2) ethnic/religious minorities in gay/queer spaces.

With these findings in mind, this paper asks what alternative solutions are available to queer Muslims in the absence of such representational shifts in ethnoreligious spaces and queer spaces. Challenging and successfully changing hegemonic queerphobia and anti-Muslim or racist hatred is a tall order for any one individual, even on a local level. Therefore, this paper argues that social contexts that simultaneously affirm queer, religious, and ethnic identities are the most beneficial to queer Muslims in the UK. I identify two concrete services that such targeted groups may offer in order to improve identity integration among individual queer Muslims:

1. They may offer a physical or virtual space for individuals to develop a sense of belonging and acceptance.
2. They may challenge and work to shift perceptions of queer Muslims in the larger queer community and the larger Muslim community through charitable and activist efforts.

Jaspal and Cinnirella’s work serves as a pertinent comparison to mine, as disparities in our results may elucidate the benefits specific to groups that affirm religious and ethnic identities in addition to queer identities. In the following chapter, I explain the methodology I used in my research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I conducted my research over five months, from late-May through mid-September 2018. While I was primarily based in London, I held interviews with individuals in different cities across the UK and participated in an event in Brighton and Hove. This section details and rationalizes my methods of data collection and analysis. I also discuss my approach to issues of consent and confidentiality.

3.a. Qualitative Approach

Adrian Holliday (2007: 2) rightfully observes that, “qualitative research will always involve quantitative elements and vice versa.” However, these two general approaches remain distinct in several important ways. The value of quantitative research lies primarily in its ability to identify statistically significant differences and thus often requires a large corpus and numerically operationalized variables. For example, we might record the frequency of the usage of certain words associated with a negative affect, such as “fear,” “scared,” or “angry,” in queer Muslims’ coming-out narratives. We might then compare this with the frequency of such terms in non-Muslims’ coming-out narratives. This would be a suitable approach to answering a question such as: do queer Muslims generally experience the coming-out process more negatively than queer non-Muslims in the UK? On the other hand, while it may lack statistical support, qualitative analysis is capable of drawing broader conclusions than quantitative analysis and may tackle *why*- and *how*- questions (Holliday 2007). A qualitative approach might be employed to look at questions such as: How does the coming-out process influence queer Muslims’ belief in Islam? Why are closeted queer Muslims closeted? Or, how might queer Muslims perform their religion and sexual or gender identities to maintain safety?

While both qualitative and quantitative methods could be used to study the broad themes I have discussed in previous chapters, the particular research questions I have set forth lend themselves better to a qualitative approach, as I am primarily interested in the *why* and the *how* behind the construction of queer Muslim identities and communities. Secondly, a qualitative approach is appropriate for my study due to

limitations of sample size. A statistically representative and generalizable sample size was not feasible in this study, due to time constraints and the length of interviews.

3.b. Participant Observation

I collected my data, in part, through participant observation, a method of ethnographic research. I did an online search for relevant support groups, sent out an email to three (see Appendix 3), and received a response from one within a few days. I heard back from a second group about a month later. The first group to get back to me is called Hidayah⁵, which means “guidance” in Arabic. On its website, Hidayah is described as, “a secular organization, however its projects and activities are developed specifically for the needs of LGBTQI+ Muslims” (Hidayah 2017). Their mission is “to provide support and welfare for LGBTQI+ Muslims and promote social justice and education about the Muslim LGBTQI+ community to counter discrimination, prejudice and injustice” (Hidayah 2017). Since one of Hidayah’s core aims is to bring visibility and awareness to the existence of queer Muslims and the struggles they face, the board was open to meeting and working with me.

I first met Hidayah members at their Ramadan Shoebox Appeal, for which we prepared and boxed food for homeless people. Following this event, the Hidayah board asked me to join them for an Iftar gathering and invited me to march with them at Pride in London. I later attended two of their monthly “Stories Events” and marched with members of Hidayah and several other British support and activist groups in Brighton and Hove Pride. After each of these events, I wrote down my first impressions along with relevant bits of the experience that I wanted to remember.

As I became more involved with Hidayah, I was added to their members WhatsApp group. A Hidayah member also invited me to join a Kik group she manages for queer Muslims called “UK Muslims Support.”⁶ I was later added to another Kik group called “Muslims Support 2.” While these online networks are not among my primary objects

⁵ With permission from several board members, including their chair, I have not anonymized this organization’s name. Hidayah aims to raise awareness of the queer-Muslim experience. Increasing their public profile is a piece of that puzzle.

⁶ This group is a public online forum. At the request of the moderator, I have not anonymized its name.

of analysis, they were essential in forging deeper connections with other members and understanding group dynamics. Not only was participant observation a source of research material itself, but it also facilitated my second method of data collection: semi-structured interviews.

3.c. Semi-Structured Interviews

Recruitment

Participant observation helped shape my interview questions and structure, as it gave me a sense of issues affecting queer Muslims in the UK and debates within their communities. Moreover, participating in events and online group chats was indispensable in recruiting interviewees. With permission from group administrators, I sent out a call for research participants, explaining my research and objectives, to the Hidayah members WhatsApp group and the UK Muslims Support Kik group. A friend also forwarded the message to another WhatsApp group for queer Muslims in London.

I had attended three Hidayah events by the time I sent out the call for research participants. This meant that I had already gained the trust and friendship of several active Hidayah members, a necessary step in research on queer Muslim populations (Yip 2008). After I sent out the call for research participants, one member wrote, “Can I please request that everyone takes part? It’s only through this kind of research and work that we can improve things in the Muslim LGBT+ community. Thank you [the researcher’s name]! You have my full support.” Another wrote, “I have also met [the researcher’s name] on many occasions and am taking part in her study. Looking forward to it :)” A third person privately messaged some of the group members on my behalf, as she knew them better than I did. These public and private endorsements of my research and trustworthiness were essential, as anonymity was a concern of many participants.

Participant demographics

I conducted interviews with ten individuals who identify as queer and Muslim. I structured my interviews around two primary goals. I aimed to:

1. Get an idea of the lived, individual, subjective experiences of queer Muslims in the UK, and

2. Understand how queer Muslim communities might have affected these experiences.

Since I intend to provide insight into my participants' individual experiences, rather than draw representative findings, I believe that their demographic heterogeneity is beneficial to my research. My participants' ages ranged from 19 to 40. While the majority of them were from London, I also interviewed individuals from Newcastle, Glasgow, Manchester, and an asylum seeker from Bangladesh. Most of my participants were second-generation immigrants and had navigated British Pakistani or British Bangladeshi identities since childhood. One interviewee, Adam, had converted to Islam as an adult and identified as white.

Throughout this paper, I use the terminology participants used to describe themselves. An alternative approach would have been to assign each participant to a category based on questions around behavior. However, as this study is interested in the politics of identity, I asked participants how they identified and did not ask about their sexual behavior or romantic history. While all of my participants identified as Muslim, three of them were not practicing and were skeptical of the religion. They separately explained to me that they continue to identify as Muslim for cultural reasons and see it as part of their ethnic identity. The rest of my participants identified as Shia or Sunni, besides Adam and Joy, who did not identify with a particular sect.

The interview

I conducted three interviews over the phone and seven in person. In terms of location, I opted for semi-public settings in the most convenient areas for interviewees. As a result, each in-person interview took place in London in either a public park or café.

After explaining my university affiliation, the aims of my research, confidentiality, and the participant's right to terminate the interview or skip any question, I obtained verbal, recorded consent for each interview. I also explained the likely readership and asked if I could use their anonymized responses for academic work outside of my dissertation. Some interviewees asked me to contact them if that situation were to arise, but most of them did not take issue with their responses being used on other platforms, with one participant jokingly asking me to "make [her] an anonymous celebrity." I offered each person a printout with my e-mail address, phone number, and

WhatsApp number, along with my supervisor's name and e-mail address. I explained that they could contact my supervisor or me if they had any questions or concerns following the interview.

While my participants were all queer and Muslim, they varied both in their particular shade of queer⁷ and in their belief and practice of Islam. The diversity of my sample lent itself to in-depth semi-structured interviews. Before each interview began, I briefly explained the conversational approach and laid out the three main sections of the interview. The semi-structured nature allowed us to have conversations “with a purpose” (Eyles and Smith 1988: 10) and enabled me to skip over irrelevant questions and delve deeper into issues that affected certain individuals more than others. I opted to retain certain academic phrasing and “jargon” in my questions, as my interviewees were all educated and had solid understandings of queer politics, issues, and terminology.

3.e. Data Analysis

I transferred audio recordings of each interview to a password-protected computer. Participant observation notes were kept on the same computer. I transcribed interviews with a program called F5 Transcription Standard. Then, I printed and coded the transcripts and notes according to relevant themes. I decided not to use any software for coding, as to avoid de-contextualization. Finally, I used thematic analysis to better understand the transcripts and notes, an approach that allows patterns to emerge across data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

⁷ While I interviewed at least one person who identified as L, G, B, T, and Q, I did not interview anyone who self-described as asexual, questioning, intersex, or pansexual.

Chapter 4:

Processes and Consequences of Identity Conflict

This chapter focuses on potential causes of identity conflict among queer Muslims in the UK. Firstly, I explore the ways in which my participants navigated and performed “good” queer Muslim citizenship in the context of their families and larger ethno-religious communities, presenting three themes that emerged during interviews. Then, I briefly discuss participants’ experiences in queer spaces that are not targeted specifically towards religious or ethnic minorities. Finally, I look at mental health consequences that may arise as a result of identity conflict.

4.a. Queer (Non)Performativity in Ethnoreligious Spaces

To varying degrees, each of my interviewees admitted to believing that queerness and Muslimness were incompatible at some point in their lives. The most commonly reported source of this feeling was family and larger ethnoreligious communities. All participants besides Adam—the man who converted to Islam as an adult—mentioned that there were members of their families who viewed non-normative sexual and gender identities negatively. This greatly affected relationships and the ways in which queerness was performed around family. One pattern I found was a form of conditional tolerance that I began to call the *don’t ask don’t tell* policy.

Don’t Ask Don’t Tell

In 1994, the Clinton Administration instituted the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) military policy. As one of the most overtly ironic pieces of legislation to date, this directive simultaneously prohibited the harassment of closeted LGB individuals in the military and outlawed openly LGB individuals from service (Department of Defense 1994). Effectively, DADT both outlawed and legalized discrimination. The explicit message was that the true crime of having a non-normative sexual identity was verbalizing it and acting upon it. In a similar spirit, three of my participants’ families tolerated their queerness on the unwritten condition that it was not mentioned or expressed in front of them.

Joy explained that she had never officially “come out” to family. For her, this means that, although she had never verbally declared herself bisexual or spoken about her queerness with family, they may have had a clue due to past girlfriends they met and Facebook posts they saw. While Joy is queer, she married a cis man. The manifestation of her queerness at the time of our interview was able to fit well enough within the framework of her family’s heteronormative expectations for it not to be a source of conflict, as long as it was not discussed.

Asmara also described a lack of dialogue around her queer identity within her family. Unlike Joy, Asmara was out to her family as a transgender woman. When I asked about her parents’ reaction, she explained:

[My father] was trying to be sympathetic and supportive which is interesting because he normally blows his top and gets angry. So I was expecting that reaction, but it didn’t happen. Instead, he went kind of straight to bargaining phase. Like, okay well, maybe you feel this way, but maybe you should just still do the right thing and try to suppress it. And [he tried to] you know convince me that I’m normal and all that stuff.

Asmara’s father’s initial sympathy and support was grounded in the belief that her transgender identity could be suppressed. She had inferred that her mother was close to accepting her, based on facial expressions during their interactions. However, she believed that her parents saw her as a gay man, as they continued to use he/him pronouns and her birth name to refer to her. A mixture of lack of communication and the linguistic erasure of Asmara’s transness are some of the conditions upon which Asmara’s relationship with her parents seemed to rely.

Like Joy and Asmara’s situations, Sadiya and her family did not discuss her queerness. After she came out to them as a lesbian, they both decided to give each other space and stopped speaking. After some time apart, they reunited. At the time of our interview, her family tolerated her identity. They knew her girlfriend and they knew that she helped manage a queer Muslim support group. She said:

They know about it. They know about it. They don’t want to get involved and that’s fine. I don’t expect them to be marching with us at Pride. But they know about it. Do you know what I mean? I can live with that.

Sadiya was clear that her family avoided the topic of her queerness, but they “leave [her] alone regarding it.”

The Burden of Being Queer

Another pattern that came up while discussing family was the fear of burdening them. Four of my participants brought up this issue, explaining that they did not want to cause “pain,” “emotional pressure,” “hurt feelings,” or “stress.” For some, this fear was linked to the fact that being queer meant they would not be able to fulfill expectations around marriage and children. One interviewee explained that the decision not to come out was rooted in respect for her family because she did not want to hurt them.

Two participants’ concerns went beyond potential emotional distress, as they feared their families could be shunned or physically harmed. When I asked Rose about her decision not to come out to family, she said that doing so would feel “selfish.” She explained:

[I don’t want] to put my family in danger or to have them ostracized and stuff. It’s more about them than about me really [...]. I just want to protect them.

Sadiya also felt a responsibility to protect her family. While she helped run a support group and was out to family, she was not as visible of an activist as some other organizers. She did not show her face in the media and withheld her last name during interviews. She worried that a high profile as a lesbian activist might lead to vandalism of her family’s home. Sadiya also echoed Rose’s concern about ostracism. Recognizing that her family was also part of a marginalized community, Sadiya defended her decision to keep a low profile:

I don’t want them to be ostracized from a community. Just like I need the LGBT community and—you know—that’s why my queer Muslim support network is there. They need the Bengali community. [...] It’s their support group. And so who am I to say my support group is more important and everything that you’ve known for the last 30, 40, 50, 60 years has to now be broken because of me?

While intentions may be noble, the negotiation and suppression of queerness in order to protect family from emotional distress and physical harm may reinforce feelings of identity conflict.

Shunning and Persecution

The third theme that emerged with regards to family relationships and the larger ethnoreligious community was the fear of being shut out and cut off entirely. Two participants told me they did not have the option of coming out to family, as they would be disowned. Four of them had been either verbally attacked or rejected by close

friends after coming out. Asmara told me that she feared being “hunted down,” explaining:

It’s not just a simple case of being cut off. You could be sort of hounded by people. I had this thought that you can’t escape it.

Asmara worried that an “indoctrinated friend of a friend of a friend” might hear about her and try to do her harm. While, fortunately, she had not experienced such an attack at the time of our interview, her fear was well founded. Abir’s story exemplifies the violence that queer people around the world may face.

Abir, an asylum seeker from Bangladesh, survived persecution. He told me that he had undergone teasing, “corrective measurements,” and torture in Bangladesh for being gay. He explained:

[The corrective measurements] were not successful, but I had to act like that, yeah, I had been corrected myself, I had been rectified. Cause there’s—there’s no other way. I wasn’t able to bear any of those things you know, even from the family. Not any the measure [*sic*] they’re taking, the actions they’re taking, the places they’re taking me out, the things they’re doing, it’s like unbearable. So, I just had to act like I had been rectified.

After convincing his family that he was no longer gay, Abir came to the UK to study. During that time, he became more confident in his sexual identity and told his family that he was, in fact, still gay. At this point, his family and his entire community in Bangladesh ostracized him. While Abir continues to experience verbal abuse in the UK from members of his local mosque, he explained that the situation waiting for him back home is “life threatening.”

4.b. Being Muslim in Queer Spaces

In addition to their experiences in their ethnoreligious communities, most of my participants had spent time occupying queer spaces that were not targeted towards ethnic or religious minorities. These included online support forums, HIV charities, student groups, “meetup” groups, activist groups, friend groups, and nightclubs. In line with Jaspal and Cinnirella’s (2012) findings, some of my interviewees reported finding acceptance in these spaces. Asmara’s group of transgender friends acted as a resource, offering her support and allowing her to experiment with gender in public. While she had not noticed racism or anti-Muslim bigotry from this group, she conceded:

Most people didn’t know about [my ethnic or religious] background. I don’t typically look like I’m from a Muslim background, so most people thought I was European in some

way. So it never really came up in conversation, unless it was specifically about that or something like that.

Asmara's group of friends was beneficial to her sense of belonging and self-esteem. However, for others, non-targeted queer spaces were an additional cause of identity conflict.

A Religion-Free Support Forum

Zara found a sense of belonging in several online transgender support forums, but felt unable to speak about religion openly. A forum she helped manage had a rule against political or religious posts. Even so, Zara decided to share an informational post, which explained that some religious groups are accepting of transgender identities. She was met with backlash from group members:

A bunch of people just decided to chime in about how religion is all nonsense. And you know I [...] told them that I didn't post those things so they had a right to come and attack my religion, or every religion. [...] So yeah there was some intolerance there.

Zara believed that the responses she received were rooted in the group's "pro-atheist" stance, rather than anti-Muslim bigotry, in particular. Nevertheless, the message was that Zara's religiosity was not welcome in the group. She would have to keep that part of herself quiet going forward.

Racial Fetishization

Postcolonial theorists discuss the concept of fetishism, which refers to an idolization of the *other*. Bhabha (1983) explains that this phenomenon fits within colonial discourse, as it relies on notions of essential difference between race categories. Participant #3, who is of South Asian descent, had experienced racial fetishization in white queer spaces.⁸ He recalled that at an LGBT event, an attendee had asked to take tokenizing pictures of him and that he had been asked to march with organizations at Pride to show that they were diverse.

These moments position participant #3 as a novelty and an outsider to the queer community. He is reduced to his ethnicity and becomes a prop for photographs. This sort of *othering* is not contained to social events. During my interview with Rafiq, we spoke about discrimination against ethnic minorities on gay dating apps. He explained:

⁸ Participant #3 requested not to have a pseudonym.

Men are just looking for white men. If they're looking for you, it's in a fetish sort of way and I think that's kind of discriminating and dehumanizing.

Racial bias and *othering* may be present at all levels of the queer community, from professional settings to romantic or sexual contexts.

Anti-Muslim Hatred

Adam's perspective allowed him to have a unique insight into hate directed towards Muslims in the queer community. Born into a Christian family, Adam grew up in a predominately white town in Northeast England. He converted to Buddhism as an adult and became very active in the queer community. He worked and volunteered for several HIV charities and queer rights activist groups, forming two of his own. An academic as well as an organizer, Adam had studied sociology and gender studies, and was working on a related PhD at the time of our interview.

Adam had established deep roots in Northeast England's queer communities when he decided to convert to Islam following the loss of a friend to HIV. He explained that telling his family and friends he was Muslim was "like coming out a second time." To his surprise, family was accepting of his new identity. His partner even suggested throwing an Eid party. However, when Adam announced this change on social media, he received some backlash from acquaintances within the queer community:

I had one guy tell me, "[you]'ve joined an oppressive religion that kills gays. I can't believe you're a part of that. You're a hypocrite after all these years of LGBT campaigning and work. I can't believe that you'd affiliate yourself with a disgusting religion of psychopaths."

Adam's recollection of his social media friend's comment fits within a broader homonationalist narrative, wherein queerness and Muslimness are pitted against each other as naturally opposing in the battle for human rights. According to this comment, Adam had betrayed his community, as Islam was an existential threat to the queer cause.

Adam and Rafiq believe that this sort of religious bigotry is grounded in a certain "defensiveness" queer people may have due to years of oppression at the hands of religion, specifically the Church. While this may be true, the effect of discriminatory attitudes and actions can be detrimental to individuals' mental health and well-being.

4.c. Mental Health Consequences of Identity Conflict

None of my planned interview questions asked directly about mental health. However, this issue came up in most of my interviews, as the majority of my participants had dealt with mental health problems. They reported that at some point in their lives they had felt “stressed,” “tense,” “scared,” “unhappy,” “guilty,” “conflicted,” “confused,” “alone,” “on edge,” and “abnormal” as a result of their identities. Several had experienced “self-hatred” and a lack of confidence. Among other issues, these feelings were attributed to not understanding their sexual feelings and to the belief that they were displeasing Allah for being queer, that they would be disowned or persecuted, that they were alone in their identities, and that they would not be able to fulfill societal expectations, like heterosexual marriage.

Five participants said they had dealt with depression related to their identities and two others described depressive symptoms, such as isolation, guilty feelings, a lack of confidence, and a negative self-image. Three interviewees told me they had experienced suicidal ideation, two had self-harmed, and one had survived a suicide attempt. One individual described symptoms of alcohol abuse, including alcohol related injuries and hospitalization. Three participants explained that they were seeing a counselor to help them with issues related to identity. It is important to note that, as I did not ask directly about mental health, it is possible that more of my participants dealt with these problems. It is also worth mentioning that those who join support groups may seek them out in attempts to resolve psychological issues. In this respect, my sample is potentially biased to show more mental health problems than if I had recruited participants in a different way.

4.d. Concluding comments

This chapter explored the sources of identity conflict among my participants. I looked at the family and broader ethnoreligious communities and their role in queer performativity. Those who were out and still in contact with family—besides Adam—were tolerated on the condition that their queerness was not displayed or discussed in their presence, to varying degrees. Asmara’s father even encouraged suppressing her transgender identity. All others—besides Abir—were not out to family due to fears of causing them emotional or physical hurt, or due to fears of being shunned or persecuted.

Non-targeted queer spaces did, indeed, act as a source of support for many participants. However, some were obligated to suppress their religiosity, while others experienced a dehumanizing racial fetishization on dating apps and at social events. Finally, Adam's experience coming out as Muslim on social media reflected the structural anti-Muslim discourse present in the "West."

Seven participants reported living a sort of "double life," wherein they acted one way when they were with family or in Muslim contexts, and acted an entirely different way when they were in non-targeted queer spaces. The notion of sexual citizenship is key here. These findings support Smith's (1994) analysis, that "good" queer citizens must keep aspects of their life private in order to maintain certain rights. To varying degrees, in the examples I have laid out, "good" queer Muslims in the UK must confine their queerness to the private in Muslim spaces and their Muslimness to the private in queer spaces, perpetuating the notion that one cannot be both openly queer and openly Muslim. I concluded this chapter with a discussion of the potential mental health consequences of such identity conflict, relaying some of the feelings and problems participants dealt with as a result of their identities.

Chapter 5:

Resolving Identity Conflict

Chapter 4 explored the processes and potential mental health consequences of the belief that queer and Muslim identities are incompatible. This chapter follows by looking at methods used by participants to attempt to resolve identity conflict. I present two broad themes that emerged: (1) rejection or suppression of elements of one's own identity and (2) attempted or successful reconciliation. Certainly, these are not neat categories with distinct boundaries. Many participants described using both of these methods at some point in their lives, sometimes at the same time.

5.a Rejection of Identity

Distancing Oneself from Religion

Four of my interviewees had either rejected religion in the past or were unsure about the existence of God at the time of our interview. All of them continued to identify as Muslim for cultural reasons. Participant #3 explained that holding on to this identity was a way of showing solidarity with a community that had been racialized and marginalized, saying he “would never deny [his] ethnic heritage.”

Asmara told me she had distanced herself from religion for a period of time. She explained that queer Muslims sometimes go through a phase in reaction to conservative Islam, thinking, “you’re going to kick me out, so I’ll kick you out first.” Abir had gone through a similar phase. At the time of our interview, he reported feeling hopeful that he could regain his faith by seeking out inclusive interpretations of Islam. He could fit himself into the Islam he was in the process of discovering without feeling guilty about being gay. However, his queer identity was non-negotiable, regardless of potential otherworldly forces. He maintained, “If I [have] the wrong interpretation, I can’t be faithful to my religion at all.”

While I do not wish to minimize participants’ intellectual agency and the validity of non-belief and humanism, the examples I have laid out indicate that the rejection of faith can act as a method of resolving identity conflict. In my sample, participants distanced

themselves from religion when they were not able to conceive of an Islam that would accept them. Unable to reconcile Islam and queerness, they left Islam.

Rejection of Queerness

Many participants told me they had gone through a sort of denial stage regarding their queerness, during which they tried to convince themselves they were straight or cisgender. Participant #3 tried to convince himself he was bisexual, so he could imagine eventually marrying a woman to fulfill societal expectations. Sadiya confessed that if she had not become involved in support groups, she would probably have married a man, despite being lesbian. Marriages of convenience, or MOCs, were a topic of discussion across the queer Muslim online support groups I observed. MOCs, in this context, referred to the practice of a gay man marrying a lesbian woman. They would live together and sometimes have children together in order to placate family and fit in better with society. There typically would be some sort of understanding between the married man and woman that they were essentially just married friends and could have other romantic or sexual partners of the same sex.

While none of my interviewees had gone through with MOCs, Khaled's story comes close. Khaled married a woman despite his friends' protestations and despite being gay. This marriage was different from an MOC because his wife was not aware of his sexual identity. After some time into the marriage, Khaled realized that the situation was unsustainable, and they divorced. Like participant #3, Asmara, and Abir, Khaled was unable to reconcile his queer identity with his interpretation of Islam. But, rather than reject his faith, he attempted to suppress his sexual identity—the effects of which were harmful to both him and his wife.

5.b Processes of Reconciliation

Many participants had rejected or suppressed parts of their identity at some point in their lives in order to resolve identity conflict. A second broad method they employed was attempting to reconcile Islam and queerness. If successful, this strategy would allow both religious belief and queer identity to remain intact and coexist peacefully.

The Context of Human History

A theme I observed across several interviews was a stress on the importance of recognizing the effects of history, politics, economics, and culture on the privileging of certain interpretations of Islam. Asmara told me that learning about the effects of Western colonization on the acceptance of queer people in majority-Muslim countries helped her begin to reconcile her identities. Zara echoed the belief that mainstream interpretations of religion are not necessarily popular for their inherent superiority, but as a result of geopolitics. She brought up the effects of the spread of Salafism by Gulf states, explaining that “all of the religious texts that are funded out of Saudi Arabia—which come to this country—are all very hardcore right-wing Salafi texts.” Finally, Joy asserted that while female Imams are extremely rare and tend to be looked down upon, Muslim women have been leading prayers in parts of China for hundreds of years. She attributed the lack of awareness of this practice to “institutionalized racism within Muslim communities.”

A related method of accepting one’s queer identity without sacrificing religiosity was the acknowledgment of the longstanding existence and tolerance of queer people in certain Muslim contexts. Adam and Zara told me about accounts that prophet Muhammad had interacted with transgender people and that they guarded his grave after his death. Zara also referenced the centuries-old existence of Hijras in South Asia and the recognition of transgender rights in Iran and Pakistan.

Inclusive Islam

Many participants reported seeking out or creating their own inclusive interpretations of Islam, alternative to mainstream belief. Joy explained that her queer identity pushed her to look deeper into religious texts, questioning doctrine:

You don’t need to learn about Islam if you are in a privileged status. You don’t need to pick up the Quran and look at every single meaning. [...] If I followed Islam the way I was raised, I would not be happy and I would probably quit Islam.

Both Joy and Rafiq believed that their examinations and subsequent reinterpretations of religious texts strengthened their faith.

Zara made sense of her queerness from an Islamic perspective, telling me that one of the ninety-nine names of Allah in Islam is “Just.” She asserted that Allah created her

as a transgender person. She could not be punished for it, as it would not be just. In a similar fashion, Joy described her interpretation of a Hadith in which prophet Muhammad sends a queer person into exile:

So, I'm thinking that prophet being a compassionate man, weary of social situations and circles, had this person exiled for their own safety, rather than actually hating this person out of religion. [...] He was only doing what was socially acceptable at that time. He couldn't actually tell this whole community, "It's perfectly okay to be queer," because you can't change an entire culture overnight.

According to Joy's reading, she might have been exiled out of "compassion" and for her own protection had she lived during the time of this story. In this way, Joy's admiration for prophet Muhammad did not conflict with her bisexuality. Her Islam did not simply tolerate her, but embraced and reaffirmed her queerness.

Participants' desire to discover Islam on their own terms was not always contained to issues of sexual and gender identity—it influenced their practice of Islam as well. They reported looking deeper into questions around drinking alcohol and eating non-Halal meat. Rafiq refrained from alcohol, but based this decision in both religion and "human anatomy." He understood that alcohol could affect health negatively, explaining "I tend to incorporate science into my religion, as I see science as God's gift to us."

Some interviewees looked to others, seeking out inclusive interpretations of Islam from experts. Abir's respect for Imams as figures of authority and knowledge brought him to contact one of the five openly gay Imams in the world:

As I speak with Imam Asif⁹, he's just giving me a lot of good advice and a lot of good reference [*sic*] that I can still bring my faith back in Islam and I can still be a Muslim and be gay.

Abir trusted that Imam Asif's inclusive interpretation of Islamic texts was legitimate due to his status as a religious leader. As Abir did not possess this level of authority himself, this relationship was vital to his ability to reconcile religious belief and being gay.

While Abir held Imams in high regard, Adam's respect for academics led him to seek out the work of Scott Kugle. Kugle's book, *Homosexuality in Islam* (2010), looks critically at the parts of the Quran and the Hadiths that are often used to justify the condemnation queer people. He argues that Islamic scripture can be understood as

⁹ Name changed to maintain anonymity.

not only tolerant, but accepting of non-normative sexual and gender identities. Adam explained that Kugle's work gave him a "liberal" interpretation of Islam:

[His books] really opened my eyes and I thought *I can do this*. I can comfortably be myself in this religion. I can now separate what I see as the cultural views of Islam versus the religious ones.

This process was transformative to Adam's understanding of his place within Islam. As an academic himself, he respected Kugle as a researcher. Adam viewed Kugle as an expert in his field, lending legitimacy to his inclusive interpretation.

5.c. Concluding Comments

This chapter explored ways in which queer Muslims may attempt to resolve identity conflict. I briefly presented some of the experiences of those who were unable to reconcile religion with being queer. Some participants found it difficult to conceive of an inclusive Islam, which led them distance themselves from religion. Khaled had trouble imagining a future as a gay Muslim, especially with the societal pressure to marry a woman. He attempted to suppress his sexual identity and soon found himself in an unhappy marriage.

Next, I looked at methods of reconciling faith and queerness. Participants brought up the effects of colonization, geopolitics, and racism on the mainstreaming of conservative interpretations of Islam. They also brought up historic and recent examples of the acceptance of queer people in Muslim contexts. These participants understood that what constitutes queerphobic hegemonic interpretations of Islam is a product of human history, psychology, economics, and politics, rather than the religion itself. In this way, they could maintain their religiosity while continuing to accept their queer identity.

Finally, I laid out rationalizations of Islamic texts that some participants used to envision an inclusive Islam. Joy and Zara interpreted the religion using their own logic and reason, while Abir and Adam looked to trustworthy experts on Islam to help them reconcile their identities.

As I mentioned earlier, these methods are not static or mutually exclusive. Queer Muslims may use multiple strategies to resolve identity conflict over time. Abir initially

rejected Islam, but later sought out Imam Asif and targeted support groups to help him reconcile religion and sexual identity. In the next chapter, I examine the role of such support groups and networks in identity integration.

Chapter 6:

The Role of Targeted Support Groups and Networks in Identity Integration

This chapter looks at the role of targeted support groups and networks in the context of the issues presented in Chapters 4 and 5. I reflect on their potential to act as a mental health resource for members. Then, I explore some of their effects on the process of reconciling faith and sexual and gender identities. Finally, I examine their capacity to promote the acceptance of queer Muslims through self-representation. While my participant observation was largely limited to Hidayah, most interviewees had also taken part in events led by other queer Muslim organizations in the UK.

6.a. Psychological Benefits

Sense of Belonging

In Chapter 4, I established that participants' ethnoreligious spaces and queer spaces were some of the main external sources of identity conflict. Hidayah provided a counter narrative, accepting members' queer and Muslim identities simultaneously. Joy explained her motivation in joining queer Muslim support groups:

I don't feel that I have to separate or choose between religion and sexuality. One thing I have noticed is within the queer community there's often this thing where you have to choose between sexual orientation and religion and it's the same with certain Muslim circles.

Indeed, the groups I studied provided physical and virtual spaces in which queer Muslims did not have to compartmentalize identities and were relatively free from judgment. Hidayah is a grassroots organization that was founded and run by queer Muslims themselves. In this way, it simultaneously offers a queer space that embraces members' Muslimness and ethnic identities and an ethnoreligious space that embraces members' queerness. In this sense, Hidayah has the authority to counteract exclusivist narratives members encounter.

A related benefit my participants commonly reported was the realization that they were not alone in their identities. Six interviewees believed that meeting other queer Muslims through support groups was pivotal to their self-acceptance, with two

describing the friendships they had made as “family.” Support groups decreased feelings of isolation. Sadiya described this change:

I met others that were like me and that was an eye-opener to know that actually I’m not potentially the only gay Muslim in the world. That for me was my saving grace.

Indeed, meeting other queer Muslims seemed to result in a more positive self-image and improved mental health in my sample. Rafiq told me that he met queer Muslim role models through Hidayah when none existed in the media. By allowing members to be unapologetically open about their queer and Muslim identities simultaneously, Hidayah changed what it meant to be a “good” queer Muslim in the spaces they provided.

Mental Health

Chapter 4 laid out some of the mental health issues participants dealt with as a result of identity conflict. During my research, I came to realize that the support groups I observed often acted as a psychological service. When I asked Sadiya about her motivations in creating Hidayah, she replied:

If we managed to just help one person, we’d hit our aim as an organization—in helping one person not want to kill themselves—to not want to commit suicide and stuff like that, you know?

This aim was reflected in monthly gatherings called “Stories Events.” These events were open to Hidayah members and revolved around a different theme each month. I attended two of these events, the themes of which were “my community” and “love and respect.” For both of these gatherings, members met up in a public place, such as a coffee shop, and discussed their experiences and challenges they faced, often offering wisdom and support to those struggling. The attendees at the Stories Events I observed ranged in their openness. Some of them spoke honestly about feelings around past relationships, rejection from family, and fitting in at the workplace. Other members listened and did not contribute verbally to the group conversations. Sadiya acknowledged their reservations, explaining, “Just to be present can be a big step.” After each Stories Event, attendees would go out for dinner together. This offered them the opportunity to forge friendships and strengthen bonds in a more casual setting.

The online forums I joined also acted as a mental health resource. They provided members with virtual networks of people with shared experiences, reachable at all

hours of the day. Conversations mostly consisted of banter, event announcements, and discussions about news, movies, and music. Rose described how she felt about a WhatsApp group she had joined:

Everyone's really welcoming on there. It's like a big family, really. And they're all really funny. If somebody's sad, they'll cheer them up. If somebody's lonely, there's always somebody online so you don't have to feel very lonely for long, because somebody will pick up and message. It's quite nice to feel connected in that way.

As Rose suggested, these online groups offered light-hearted fun as well as support for those feeling sad or depressed. This was similar to Zara's vision when she created the UK Muslims Support Kik group. She explained:

The Kik group came out of a need that wasn't really being addressed in forums that I was a part of, where people were popping up and really had almost suicidal tendencies and suicidal thoughts because they didn't have anyone to really talk to.

I observed that members of online support networks could listen to and help each other effectively, as they understood the specific complexity of queer Muslim identities—a component that existing mental health services may lack.

6.b. Reconciliation of Faith and Queerness

(Re)discovering Identity

In Chapter 5, I explored some of the methods participants used to attempt to resolve identity conflict. I looked at rejection of queerness among some and rejection of faith among others. While Khaled had suppressed his gay identity in the past, online support networks provided a platform for him to be out and open among other queer Muslims. On the other end of the spectrum, Rose had reported distancing herself from Islam and felt disconnected from her “culture.” Hidayah helped her regain this connection. She acknowledged that the group was “more of a safe link to [her] culture, than [her] family.” Rose also felt that Hidayah helped her navigate her religious identity, observing:

Since I've been to the Hidayah meetings, I feel a bit more at peace with [Islam]. I feel like I'm more included in the umbrella of being Muslim. It hasn't rejected me completely. There are many people there. They are really happy and very devout and they have a lot of faith. It gives me a bit of hope that maybe I could get the faith back or I could be more comfortable with it in the future.

Meeting queer people who embraced Islam allowed Rose to begin to imagine an Islam that might accept her. At the same time, she did not feel pressured to perform religiosity at Hidayah events. She could regain her “cultural” identity and explore her faith relatively freely in these spaces.

Interpreting Islam

Chapter 5 discussed some of the ways in which participants reconciled religion and sexual and gender identity. Common themes were the consideration of the context of history and politics and the creation or discovery of inclusive interpretations of Islam. While the support groups I observed did not host academic discussions or actively endorse any particular readings of Islamic texts, they created networks and friendships between queer Muslims. This made it possible for members to openly discuss faith and queerness.

6.c. Self-Representation

In addition to the services Hidayah offered internally, it also served as a platform for queer Muslims to represent themselves publicly. Individuals like Sadiya feared that if their names and faces were attached to their activist voices, they or their families would face violence or shunning. Nevertheless, Hidayah's public platform provided the opportunity for these voices to represent queer Muslims relatively anonymously. Decisions around logos, website branding, and signage at Pride events positioned Hidayah and queer Muslims within the broader public.

While I was marching with Hidayah's section at Pride in London, a member of the board offered me a t-shirt and asked me to wear it during the event. The shirt was white with the organization's logo (Image 1)—a large cartoon image of a mosque covered in rainbows—printed in the center. Under the mosque read the words "Hidayah Gender, Sexuality & Islam." Most members wore these shirts while marching. The logo covered our section, prominent on banners and posters as well. At the front of our section, a member of Hidayah spun around and waved at onlookers. She was dressed in full drag and wore an ornate blue and gold lehenga—a traditional South Asian gown. These decisions presented Hidayah as unapologetically queer and unapologetically Muslim, providing a positive image of itself to both the public and to their own members, for some of whom living confidently and openly is still aspirational. Moreover, the integration of queer symbolism (the rainbows and the drag queen) and Islamic and South Asian symbolism (the mosque and lehenga) suggested that queerness was compatible with Muslimness and South Asianness, challenging Islamist, Huntingtonian, and homonationalist narratives of unavoidable civilizational

“clash” between Islam and the “East” and supposed Western values. The notion of hybridity is particularly relevant to this dimension of Hidayah, as these examples may be read as instances of queer Muslim Asian subalternity coming into self-representation.

Image 1: Hidayah logo



(Source: Hidayah LGBT+ 2016)

6.d. Concluding Comments

This chapter examined the role of queer Muslim support groups and networks in the context of my interviewees’ experiences dealing with identity conflict. I went over the potential psychological benefits such groups may offer, highlighting organizers’ motivations to improve members’ mental health. Then, I looked at the impacts these affirmative spaces had on the ability to reconcile Islam and queerness. Finally, I briefly discussed decisions regarding public self-representation and their possible impacts on those within and outside of the queer Muslim community. A common element in each of these themes is the benefit of the simple existence of other queer Muslims. Through social contact with people like them, members of the groups I studied felt less isolated, were able to conceive of an inclusive Islam, and found confident queer Muslim role models.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This paper studied the construction of queer Muslim identities in the UK, with a specific focus on the role of community. I explored issues related to identity conflict through a thematic analysis of qualitative research conducted during the summer of 2018, presenting my findings across three empirical chapters.

I began by looking at the roots of identity conflict. I found that participants' ethnoreligious communities played a substantial role in feelings of rejection. Some also had experienced racism and religious intolerance in non-targeted queer spaces. I situated my observations within the field of citizenship studies. With Smith's (1994) "good homosexual" citizen in mind, I discussed the conditions upon which the tolerance of queer Muslims relies. I theorized that the "good" queer Muslim is obligated to keep their queerness private in their ethnoreligious spaces and their Muslimness private in queer spaces in order to maintain their status as a member of these groups. After establishing some of its causes, I explored strategies participants employed to attempt to resolve identity conflict. I proposed two broad categories that may overlap and change over time: (1) attempts to reject or suppress elements of one's identity and (2) attempts to reconcile identities. The final empirical chapter examined the role of queer Muslim support groups and networks within the context of my participants' experiences with identity conflict. I found that these spaces could take on the role of a psychological service, noting that improving members' mental health was a motivation of organizers. I also looked at Hidayah's self-representation at Pride through a postcolonial lens, reading it as a hybrid moment that challenged notions of mutual exclusivity between Muslimness/Asianness and queerness.

In the beginning of this paper, I discussed Jaspal and Cinnirella's (2012) conclusion that well-being may be improved by more positive representations of (1) queerness in ethnoreligious spaces and (2) ethnic/religious minorities in queer spaces. I expressed skepticism in the feasibility of changing hegemonic prejudice in these contexts within a timeframe that would benefit my participants. The final empirical chapter of this paper responded to this issue by identifying Hidayah as both an ethnoreligious space and a queer space, citing its grassroots nature and its management by queer Muslims

themselves. While Hidayah does, indeed, challenge prejudice in wider queer and ethnoreligious spaces through self-representation, it also offers an alternative inclusive space. Because Hidayah is both queer and Muslim from its members to its chair, it has the authority to create new conditions for “good” queer Muslim citizenship in the spaces it provides, alternative to those identified in Chapter 4.

My results suggest that targeted support groups and networks are beneficial to queer Muslims in the UK. To my knowledge, this is the first study to look at the specificity of the effects of targeted support groups and networks on queer Muslim well-being and citizenship. As my findings are not generalizable, further research may aim for a larger sample size. Comparative research into the differences between targeted and non-targeted support groups may be useful as well.

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