ABSTRACT

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Previous research shows that Arab and Muslim Americans experience mixed messaging about their status within a U.S. racial hierarchy. They are treated as a racial other in day-to-day interactions but are not named this way in other spaces; up until recently, the U.S. census did not have a category for those with a MENA background. Much of this research has utilized racial formation theory to analyze the race-making processes imposed upon this population. This literature has mostly focused on macro-level, state-enacted racial projects and how they influence Arab and Muslim Americans' micro-level social interactions. Scholars have advocated for more research in this vein, and to investigate racial identity formation in various dimensions of one's social world. Literature on identity theory argues that dating is one dimension through which we can examine socialization processes. Using in-depth interviews with ten Arab-Muslim immigrant women in North Carolina, this research project explores how these women's racial identities inform their dating decisions, and how their dating experiences shape their racial identity formation. My findings show that Arab-Muslim immigrant women make strategic dating choices in order to maintain their racial identities, and their dating decisions give insight to how they have constructed these identities. This study fills gaps in research by focusing on a population with a unique racial positioning and provides evidence for the significance of romantic relationships in racial formation processes.

Arab-Muslim Immigrant Women, Dating, and Racial Formation

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to Zain, one of my brilliant participants, who passed away after this research was conducted. I am grateful I got the chance to know them and their wonderful spirit. I am also grateful for their candidness and warmth during our interview, and the meaningful discussions we had about what it means to be Arab. I am so happy our paths crossed.

I also dedicate this paper to the Palestinian cause. Thank you to my Palestinian participants who were vulnerable with me and shared their stories, and to Palestinian women everywhere who fight passionately and endlessly to preserve their culture and homeland.

BIOGRAPHY

Leena Torky was born in Cairo, Egypt and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 12. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Meredith College and now resides in Raleigh, NC.

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I am immensely grateful to my wonderful committee, Sarah Bowen, Michaela DeSoucey, and Andrea Leverentz. Thank you for your patience and guidance throughout this process, I have learned so much from all of you. I also thank my parents and my fiancé for their endless support and care, I could not have done this without you. Finally, I thank my participants, the Arab women and femmes who made this research possible. I will forever cherish their vulnerability, passion, and willingness to share parts of their lives with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships act as landscapes in which we learn and exchange ideas about who we are. People's choice of partners and the networks and sexual scripts they rely on to pursue these partners offer insight into their social identities. Gendered and racialized identities shape people's romantic and sexual interactions, and these interactions simultaneously become spaces in which people enact their gendered and racialized identities. People with marginalized gender and racial identities must create new ways to navigate dating and intimacy. Arab and Muslim immigrant women are an especially interesting case for studying the intersections between dating and racial identity formation.

Arab and Muslim people experience increased racial stigma and stereotyping as a result of ongoing imperialist projects imposed upon the MENA region, which have strengthened in the years since 9/11. Existing research has focused primarily on the experiences of Muslim men. Some studies do center the experiences of Muslim and Arab women; they primarily focus on women's experiences of discrimination, especially related to wearing the Hijab or modest fashion in the West. While these are undoubtedly important areas of research, there is a need for more studies about the choices that Muslim American women make in their everyday social interactions when not fraught with instances of discrimination.

In this study, I look at the ways Arab-Muslim[1] immigrant women's dating experiences influence how they construct their racial identity, and how their racial identity shapes their

[1] I use the term "Arab-Muslim" when referring to my sample for two reasons: 1. It most accurately describes my participants as all of them originated from Arabic-speaking countries, and all were Muslim to some extent (those

approach to dating. I analyze ten semi-structured qualitative interviews with Arab-Muslim immigrant women[2] in North Carolina about their dating experiences. I find that women make strategic dating choices in order to maintain their racial and ethnic identities. Their dating decisions give insight to, and also shape, how they construct their racial and ethnic identities. My research illustrates how racial identity influences Muslim Arab women's adherence to or rejection of certain sexual scripts. I find that people with marginalized identities can secure closer proximity to Whiteness by making strategic choices in their dating endeavors and broader social experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial Formation

Scholars today generally agree that race is a social construct (Omi and Winant 1986), but the study of race from a constructivist perspective was not always a norm within sociology. Until the late 19th century, social scientists attributed racial inequalities to biological differences between races, particularly between Black and White individuals (Bonilla-Silva 2002). Sociologists such as Boas (1911) and Du Bois (1898) began debunking such arguments as pseudo-scientific during the early 20th century. In the mid- to late 20th century, scholars began to

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who described themselves as not religious still grew up in a Muslim home). 2. It captures the racialization of the Arab national identity and the Muslim religious identity. I use the terms "MENA," "Middle Eastern," and "Arab and/or Muslim American" when referring to the broader population also subject to the racialization processes I discuss.

[2] It is important to note that one of my participants identified as non-binary. However, I use the term "women" when referring to my sample because interviews operated within the context of participants' *socialization* as women. This participant was femme-presenting and responded to my recruitment flyer with the knowledge that this study looks at the experiences of women and shared their experiences through this lens.

adopt a constructivist approach to analyses of race and ethnicity (Weber 1978). Sociologists conceptualized race as shaped by social processes and forces, focusing mainly on the Black - White binary (Bonilla-Silva 2002).

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's pivotal work *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986, 1994) had an important impact on the literature on race and racialization as we know it today. Omi and Winant rejected reductive analyses of race as a *product* of social processes and hierarchical structures and argued that scholars need to center race itself. Racial formation theory posits that social actors and institutions de/reconstruct race depending on the goals of the dominant group at the time (Omi and Winant 1986, 1994, 2015). Omi and Winant analyzed how racism affects individual identities and how those identities shape society; they argued that racial formation is "the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 2014:109). Social actors establish racial categories in order to draw boundaries around the distribution of resources so that the dominant group – Whites – can maintain or improve their position within societal hierarchies. In the US, there exists a sort of "racial etiquette" that guides how we engage with others based on their perceived racial status; these decisions are based on agreed-upon markers of one's racial identification, such as physical characteristics (Omi and Winant 1986). Thus, discomfort arises in interactions where a person's racial categorization is unclear and therefore does not align with any established social rules/etiquette surrounding race. In this sense, lack of racial identity puts one at risk of having no concrete identity altogether (1986). Whereas people with established racial identities which have been in American racial hierarchies are able to situate themselves within an existing mode of "etiquette" (e.g., White , Black, Asian, Native), those with people categorizations must work harder to seek out an understanding of their own racial identification

in relation to others. The framework of racial formation also considers the shifting political and economic conditions in contemporary US society and addresses the racial formation of groups outside of the traditional Black -White binary. According to this theory, the racial formation process is facilitated by "racial projects," which create links between racial ideologies and resource distribution (Omi and Winant 1986; 1994, Love 2017)**.**

Researchers most commonly interact with racial formation theory at a macro level, by focusing on states, social movements, politics, and power relations. For example, scholars draw on this theory to conceptualize the broader racial hierarchy of a society. Some argue that the US racial hierarchy is characterized by a White /non-White binary (Warren and Twine 1997), while others may use a Black /non-Black approach (Lee and Bean 2004). Some propose a more complex divide, such as a tri-racial hierarchy that includes "contemporary" racial categorizations in the US resulting from an increase in immigrant populations and multiculturalism (Bonilla-Silva 2002).

Critics of Omi and Winant's framework argue that it is predominantly a macro-level model that emphasizes the state's role in constructing racial projects, therefore ignoring the social processes that facilitate racial formation in daily interactions (Faegin and Sean 2013, Dennis 2013, Cheng 2014, Koshy 2008, Lee 2008, Nguyen 2008). In response, Omi and Winant expanded on their concept of racial formation by arguing that racial projects at macrosocial levels (such as legislation) and microsocial levels (such as individual experiences with prejudice) converge over time to shape racialized social structures and individuals' own racial identifications (2008). They state that "any claim to racial identity necessarily connects the claimer to others making similar claims and to the sociohistorical system in which that identity acquires meaning" (2008:1567).

Simply put, people's racial identities and a society's racial hierarchy are shaped by micro and macro level processes. Researchers have shown how individual racial attitudes and experiences shape people's identities, while also considering the political and state structures that allow for such discrimination to take place (Love 2017).

Racial formation theory is an especially useful framework for studies understanding Arab and Muslim-Americans' experiences and racial identities because of the complex racialization processes that have taken place with this group since 9/11. Researchers use on Omi and Winant's racial formation theory when analyzing MENA Americans' social conditions (Marvasti and McKinney 2004, Zarrugh 2016, Love 2017, Naber 2017), as this theory captures how "race is inextricably connected to the state and in constant dynamic tenson with hegemonic practice from above and political struggle from below" (Naber 2017:6). For the purpose of my research, I use racial formation theory to analyze how microsocial processes – in this case, dating experiences – converge with macrosocial processes to solidify individuals' racial identities.

Racial Formation and Muslim Americans

Scholars argue that Muslim and Arab Americans' racial identification is continuously shifting within contemporary American racial hierarchies (Naff 1985, Naber 2000, Love 2017, Maghbouleh 2017, Alimahomed-Wilson 2020). In order to illustrate the nature of these shifts in racialization, it is important to acknowledge the sociopolitical effects of 9/11 on the status of Arab and Muslim Americans.

Much of the post-9/11 scholarship on the racial formation of Muslim and Arab Americans interacts with racial formation as theorized by Omi and Winant. In his conceptualization of a developing tri-racial hierarchy in the US, Bonilla-Silva (2002) argues that

Middle Eastern Americans – previously placed within the general category of "White" and– would move into the emerging category of "Honorary Whites," situated above "Collective Black " and under "Whites." Bonilla-Silva draws upon Omi and Winant to describe how racial projects would facilitate this process (1997). However, subsequent research in the years following 9/11 found that this did not accurately reflect the true state of Arab and Muslim Americans' racial categorization in the US. After 9/11, Muslim Americans experienced increased marginalization and discrimination (Widener and Chicoine 2011, Love 2017). Islamophobia is especially palpable within the realms of national security and border control, with counterterrorism efforts used to justify discrimination and racial profiling against Muslim Americans (Alimahomed-Wilson 2020, Love 2017), leading to "an unprecedented expansion of the so-called security state" in the years since 9/11 (Love 2017:100). Scholars argue that Arab and Muslim Americans' marginalization is not a new phenomenon that resulted directly from 9/11, but the *ways* in which this marginalization operates have evolved.

Scholars argue that although the US has historically categorized them as "White", Arab and Muslim Americans do not receive the same structural and institutional privileges as Whites. Furthermore, scholars analyze the racial dilemma Arab and Muslim American immigrants face, arguing that Arab and Muslim Americans must grapple with the fact that they do not fit into a concrete racial identity within an American racial hierarchy (Love 2017). Currently, there is no category for "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" or "MENA" (Middle East and North Africa) in the US census. Because of this, respondents often check the box labeled "White," even though American society perceives and treats them as a person of color (Selod 2014, Love 2017, Maghbouleh 2017). Furthermore, many Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans feel that their national or religious identity is far more salient than any ascribed racial identity, further complicating the

issue (Love 2017). Data has also shown that Americans often misplace Islamophobia by directing it at non-Muslim Desi individuals, such as Indian Hindus or Sikhs (Love 2017, Alimahomed-Wilson 2020). Scholars present this as evidence that people assign certain racial features and characteristics to the identity of "Muslim" or "Arab", effectively "othering" them. In short, drawing on racial formation theory, many scholars assert that Islamophobia is inherently racialized, and is upheld by ongoing racial projects (Bonilla-Silva 2002, Love 2017, Naber 2012).

Muslim and Arab Americans' religious identities shape how they are racialized. Even though many MENA American immigrants are non-Muslim, the MENA identity is often conflated with Islam, and "race operates at the core of Islamophobia" (Love 2017:2). One's immigration experiences can also shape their racialized identity; the amount of time someone has lived in their country of origin versus in the US can impact the extent to which they have internalized Western racial ideologies. Some previous scholarship argues for the bridging of immigration research and racial formation theory in the analysis of immigrant identities (Cheng 2014). Factors like religious identity and immigration status combine with other aspects of socialization (for example, families and peer groups) to facilitate the formation of people's racial identities.

Socialization as it Relates to Muslim Americans' Racial Formation

Sociologists argue that socialization is a key factor in racial formation processes (Phinney and Rotheram 1987, Bowman and Howard 1985 Hughes et al. 2006, Wang et al. 2020). Theories of socialization posit that as we grow, we develop an understanding of our social world and

where we stand within it, and that this process occurs through the internalization of social norms in both individual and group interactions (Locke 1690, Cooley 1902, Mead 1934).

My thesis draws on racial formation theory as its main theoretical framework. I also incorporate theories of socialization as they relate to racial identity formation. On a microsocial level, day-to-day interactions and self-perception are essential to racial formation processes (Omi and Winant 2008). One strand of this scholarship, Ethnic Racial Socialization (ERS), illustrates how parents and educators transmit values and understandings of race and/or ethnicity to their children (Faegin and Ausdale 1996, 2001, Hughes et al 2006). Early literature within this strand focused on Black American communities and operated from a framework of a traditional Black - White racial binary (Bonilla-Silva 1994, 2002). As scholarship on ERS has developed, scholars have examined how immigrant parents transmit native cultural values and traditions to their children (Phinney and Rotherman 1987, Kibria 1997, Foner 2009, Chung 2013).

Identity theory can also provide insights into how people form a racial identity. Identity theory examines how social structures mold people's identities, and how people manage their identities as they react to social stimuli (Mead 1934, Stryker and Burke 285:2000). Social actors interact and behave in ways that align with shared meanings associated with specific identity standards (Burke and Reitzes 198, Burke 2003, Burke 2006, Burke and Stets 2000).

Dating and Racial Formation

Some scholars have emphasized the significance of romantic relationships in identity formation processes (Erikson 1968, Dyk and Adams 1987, Furman and Shaffer 2003, Collins et al. 2009). Romantic and sexual interactions are examples of day-to-day social processes that shape racial formation (Dunn 2022). Some recent studies have analyzed dating practices among Muslim Americans. For example, in an ethnographic study on the lives of Muslim-American teenage boys, O'Brien (2017) found that these boys made strategic dating decisions in order to navigate clashing cultural expectations. They kept "multiple cultural rubrics at play" and sought out "the subjective experience of religious Islam and American youth dating culture while trying not to feel overly constrained or fully defined by either one" (111). To ease this friction, the boys developed "social solutions" to their dating dilemma. They either followed a dating rubric centered around religious and cultural compatibility, in which they could draw clear boundaries around practices that could be considered *haram* (sinful), or they "actively resisted attempts to set their romantic relationship within an Islamic cultural framework" (82).

O'Brien's study focused on Muslim boys, but other researchers have reported similar findings for Muslim women and the strategic, creative ways they choose to navigate courtship - specifically within the realm of online dating. One study found that in personal advertisements placed by Muslims, women were more likely than men to emphasize their religiosity and seek out religious partners (Badahdah and Tiemann 2005). That study was conducted before online dating became widespread. More recently, scholars argue that by using online dating platforms, Muslims can more easily integrate different aspects of their identities into the relationships of their choosing, and that Muslim women particularly experience heightened agency in this case (Rochadiat et al. 2017). When dating online, Muslim women enjoy the benefits of increased

privacy and control over interactions (e.g. initiating the conversation, the ability to remove/block other users) but still exhibit a desire to maintain Islamic dating norms and traditions (2017). Evidence suggests that prioritization of Islamic identity within dating practices increases women's agency in spouse selection processes, and that these women make efforts to fortify their religious beliefs while also reinterpreting Islamic doctrine so as to redefine gender roles/norms (Othman 2022). In general, research on dating and identity among Muslim women has focused mostly on religious identity, rather than racial identity and formation.

Some studies have approached the intersection of religious, racial, and ethnic identification in more nuanced ways. Acosta's (2013) research on queer Latina women reveals that in their dating practices, immigrant women shift through visibility and invisibility depending on the social context; they highlight certain identities and de-emphasize others in order to mitigate the strain of identity de-verification. This process involves strategic maintenance of Latina and/or American White standards of femininity. Acosta argues that because religious and racial identities often overlap, immigrant women who exist in a cross-cultural landscape must contend with various, sometimes clashing, processes of identity formation at the microsocial level of racial formation.

I argue that by examining dating practices among Arab-Muslim immigrant women we can achieve a more synthesized conception of how dating experiences inform racial formation and intersect with other aspects of people's identities. Because the Muslim identity has been racialized in US society, these women occupy a unique racial category that is dependent upon other facets of identity besides more common markers of race, such as phenotypical features. Furthermore, due to the very current shifts in Arab and Muslim Americans sociopolitical status, this racial category is also elastic and in-flux (Love 2017). Religious identity, as well as ethnic,

cultural, and national identities, are instrumental in the maintenance of racial projects aiming to cement a concrete "race" in our collective understanding of American social structure (Cheng 2014).

METHODS

In this study, I examine how Arab-Muslim women talk about their social lives and dating experiences, and how these experiences influence, and are influenced by, these women's racial-ethnic and religious identities. Previous research on Arab racial formation in the US has not considered how dating choices and experiences may be tied to Arab women's racial formation. However, other studies show that intimate relationships and dating practices are tightly linked to people's racial, ethnic, and religious identities (Dunn 2022). In order to interrogate the social processes involved in racial formation as it relates to dating, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews. My interviews allowed me to gain an intimate understanding of these women's day-to-day lives, how they made choices while seeking romantic relationships, and the role their racial identities play in the process. Due to the semi-structured nature of these interviews, I was able to probe respondents about how they perceived themselves and their social landscapes.

The sample for this study consisted of ten Arab-Muslim immigrant women between the ages of 18 and 28[3] living in metropolitan areas of North Carolina[4]. All participants were first- or

[3] I set the age range at 18 – 30 when recruiting participants. In my sample, the oldest participant ended up being 28.
[4] Although North Carolina does not have a significantly large Arab-Muslim community compared to other states, I decided to recruit here because I had the most access to this community as an Arab resident of this state. Also,

second-generation immigrants (meaning they were born in another country before immigrating to the US, or they were born in the US after their parents immigrated from their origin country) and had never been married. I selected first- or second-generation immigrants because I was interested in how transnationality shaped participants' dating experiences. I posited that first- and second-generation women would both likely have some ties to their country of origin-- for example, staying in contact with family members there, visiting the country, or staying familiar with popular culture there. I chose never-married participants because I aimed to understand the choices and strategies made by women while seeking out potential marriage partners, as well as their personal feelings about marriage during a life stage in which societal pressure to "settle down" begins to intensify.

All participants originated from Arabic-speaking, Muslim-majority countries. Of the 10 participants, three were Palestinian, two were Sudanese, and the remaining five were Lebanese, Kuwaiti, Saudi Arabian, Jordanian, and Egyptian. Six participants were first-generation immigrants, and four were second-generation immigrants. Six participants identified as Arab and/or Middle Eastern, two identified as racially White with an Arab ethnic-cultural background, and two (the two Sudanese participants) identified as Black with an Arab cultural background. All participants had grown up in Muslim homes. Six still identified as Muslim and engaged in Islamic spiritual practices, and four identified as agnostic and/or more "culturally Muslim," meaning that they participated in some Islamic practices during family and community events, but overall did not connect with Islam spiritually. Most participants had completed some form of

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considering that Arab-Muslim communities can vary depending on region, I decided my findings would be more consistent if I focused on one, more condensed, community.

higher education, except for an 18-year-old who had just graduated from high school and a 20-year-old college student in her sophomore year. Participants' jobs varied: from servers and baristas, research analysts, healthcare professionals, and artists. In terms of relationship status, all participants were unmarried. Two were in long term relationships, and eight were single and/or engaging in casual dating or courtship at the time of the interview. Six participants were heterosexual and/or cisgendered women. Of the four queer participants, three identified as bisexual and one identified as lesbian. Additionally, one participant identified as nonbinary and used they/them pronouns, and another identified as a gender nonconforming woman who used she/they pronouns.

Starting in April 2023, I recruited participants by reaching out to organizations and social media groups catering to Arab and Muslim communities in North Carolina and sharing a flier with a description of myself and this study. I then utilized snowball sampling to contact potential participants through referrals from leaders and members of these community organizations and social media. Interviews took place between May and August 2023 and lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. Five interviews were conducted through Zoom, and five were in-person. The locations for in-person interviews were selected by the participants; three occurred in a campus library and two occurred in the participant's home. Respondents voluntarily agreed to be a part of this study and were explicitly informed that their identities would remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any identifiable information in the written analysis. The first half of the interview questions revolved around the participant's day-to-day lives, family background, and social circles, and the second half focused more closely on dating experiences. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through the Zoom recording cloud; during in-person interviews, I placed my phone or laptop near the participant while an

empty Zoom meeting remained running with the camera off. This allowed for all audio recordings to be transcribed in a consistent manner. I used Zoom's AI generated transcripts and revised them for quality control.

I began my analysis by examining interview transcripts and creating a codebook based on the consistent themes I detected across participants. After establishing these thematic codes, I grouped participants according to themes. These themes included independence/individualism vs. collectivism, Western dating and sexual scripts vs. Arab-Muslim traditional dating and sexual scripts, and proximity to or distance from Whiteness.

My positionality as an Arab-Muslim immigrant woman played an important role in this study. I was able to establish a rapport with participants by sharing my own ethnic and religious background, and this facilitated a sense of understanding and vulnerability between myself and the participant. My ability to speak Arabic made it possible for participants to convey certain feelings or concepts that could have been lost in translation, and many participants used Arabic words or phrases casually throughout the interviews. I was aware that, due to the current stigma surrounding Arabs and Muslims in the US, participants may have felt anxious about sharing stories or sentiments that could potentially uphold negative stereotypes perpetuated by the West. By being vulnerable about my own background and experiences as an Arab-Muslim woman in the US, I aimed to make participants aware that I would handle their narratives with sensitivity and care, and that I could understand the nuances of their experiences. However, my insider status came with some challenges; because participants knew about my background and subsequent understanding of Arab and Muslim cultural norms, they tended to assume I would know what they were referencing or alluding to when describing certain experiences or

interactions. To avoid filling in the blanks with my own biases during the analysis period, I consistently asked for elaboration in these instances.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION

My study examined how Arab-Muslim immigrant women make strategic dating choices in order to maintain their racial and ethnic identities. Below is a table of participant statistics based on information provided during interviews:

Table 1: Participant Statistics

NAME	AGE	ORIGIN COUNTRY	GEN	RACIAL ID	FRIENDS	SEXUALITY	PARTNER'S ID
Basma	20	Palestine	2nd	White	mostly non-Arab, mixed	straight	White, non-Muslim
Fatima	23	Kuwait	1st	Arab	Mostly Arab/Muslim + POC	straight	Arab, Muslim
Zain	27	Lebanon	2nd	White	mostly non-Arab, mixed but more White	queer	White, non-Muslim
Nour	26	Jordan	2nd	White (?)	mostly White, but close to Arab cousins	queer	White, non-Muslim
Amal	23	Sudan	1st	Black	Mostly Arab/Muslim + POC	queer	n/a, past partners mixed
Hadeel	26	Sudan	1st	Black	Mostly Arab/Muslim + POC	straight	n/a, past partners all Muslim
Iman	28	Palestine	2nd	Arab	Mostly Arab/Muslim	straight	n/a - but past have all been Muslim
Naima	18	Saudi Arabia	1st	Arab/Hijazi	mostly mixed	straight	n/a - but wants only Muslim partner
Malak	28	Palestine	1st	Arab, Palestinian	mostly Arab/Muslim	straight	n/a - but most have been Muslim + wants Muslim husband
Sabah	24?	Egypt	2nd	Arab/Egyptian	Mixed	queer	n/a - most past not Muslim

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants how they identified racially. I specified the word "racially" in this question, and expanded on it by asking how they might self-identify on a form that requested their racial status. Many participants brought up the US census and expressed frustration that there is no category for Arab or Middle Eastern. Earlier this year, the US census announced that they will be adding a MENA category, which will appear on the 2030 census. Still, these women have not yet experienced this change so far. During these discussions, participants exhibited a great deal of self-reflection regarding their racial status within a US context. Hadeel, for example, said this when asked how she identifies on forms:

> Yeah, that one's really annoying, because I put White on everything. I'm not, but [the form will say], you know, "of Caucasian or Middle Eastern descent."

Another participant, Naima, shared similar thoughts when describing how she would identify herself when asked by others:

> In the census, we're supposed to be "White," but I would never, ever say that. I just think it's so stupid. So, I just tell people I'm Arab most of the time. If they keep asking, then [I'll say] I'm Saudi, specifically, I'm Hijazi.

When asked to elaborate on her feelings about filling out forms without an appropriate category for her racial identity, Naima provided a passionate response:

> I don't know, it's just like - I don't have White privilege, and no one is ever going to look at me and be like "oh, that's a White girl wearing a hijab," because that's just not their perception of White. [The term] Caucasian was originally meant for people like you and me, and then just became like, a European thing, which is fine, but it's just not the right term now. If I were to be like, "Yeah, I'm ethnically Caucasian," people would [say] "well, you're not *White"* … And honestly, I feel like it is different for me, especially because I wear hijab. I think a lot of Arab girls who don't [wear hijab] have an easier time being White passing… I have Arab

> friends who can just pretend to be White, but their names will give them away… so it's definitely easier for them. But like as a hijabi, you're just immediately clocked as "oh, that's a Muslim girl, she's probably either Arab or South Asian," you know? So even if I wanted to be White passing, which I don't, I couldn't be, because of hijab, so that's kind of my relationship with that.

Here, Naima expresses sentiments that align with Love's (2017) description of the racial dilemma experienced by Arab and Muslim Americans. Her discussion points to various dimensions of the racial project leading up to this dilemma. More specifically, she illustrates the ways in which Islam itself has become racialized. Naima has brown skin and other phenotypical features commonly associated with Arab and Middle Eastern individuals, yet she did not exclusively discuss this as an indicator of her racial status. Instead, when describing how others perceive her, she refers to her hijab – an expression of modesty exclusive to the Islamic faith – not as a symbol of her religious orientation alone, but also as a physical marker of race. The hijab is worn by Muslim women of varying racial identities and across several regions, yet she describes it as being heavily associated with an Arab racial categorization. She does not simply say that because of her hijab, others "clock her" as *Muslim*, but more specifically as Muslim and *not White.* She also discusses the ability for many Arabs to be "White -passing," implying that even Arabs perceived as White within a US context are only *passing* as so; this perception shifts as soon as another marker (for example, a name or surname) emerges and exposes them as Arab and therefore *not White.* In this sense, the Muslim identity has become racialized. Naima's statements illustrate how macro-level, state-enacted racial projects influence micro-level interactions centered around race. In this case, 9/11 set the stage for a state-enacted racial project which assigned racial meaning to aspects of the Muslim identity.

Another participant, Zain, described their own racial positioning in a way that parallels Naima's statements about White-passing Arabs. Zain is a queer Lebanese femme and has phenotypical features that are not typically associated with Arabs, such as fair skin. When asked how they identified racially, Zain said "White." Later in the interview, I asked which spaces they felt safest in as an Arab femme:

> Probably just in spaces that aren't catered towards White people…It's just, like, sometimes around White people, I'm a little weird, even though I identify as White. There's like, this little asterisk I kind of have [above] my name, or how I view myself. So, I normally have a better time, being myself in spaces where it's mainly people of color, or just more diverse, and especially also just in queer spaces as well…That's where I kind of feel comfortable, with other people who have also been marginalized in US spaces.

I asked Zain to elaborate on their use of the word "asterisk," and they explained:

> I know I'm White , because at first glance I can just pass as a White person and live my life as a White person, and basically get all the White privilege any other White person can get, and it only becomes a thing if, like, I'm at the airport, if my name is, you know, out in the public…So, that's kind of the thing that, like, exposes me for not being part of the 100% White privilege sort of thing. For the most part, I experience White privilege. That's how I have led my life, just as a White person. But, when it comes to ethnicity and stuff, if my name is out there, that's when comments [arise], and then people will definitely see me as an "other," which is very interesting a lot of the times, because I'm not an "other" until this one tiny thing is found out about me that no one would see at face value, which is horrible…But that's just something that occurs in society and what not, a whole "us versus them" mentality.

Here, Zain exhibits awareness of others' perception of them as White and acknowledges that they do not often experience Islamophobia or racism as a result. However, Zain also confirms Naima's statements about the unstable nature of a White-passing Arab's privilege; they stated

that people's perceptions shifted once they became aware of Zain's full name, and that this led to them being categorized as "other." In this sense, Zaim expresses how Arabs indeed experience a sort of "honorary Whiteness" (Bonilla-Silva 2002), but this status is conditional and inconsistent. White and/or non-Arab Americans perceive individuals like Naima, with typically "Arab" phenotypical features and other racial-religious markers like the hijab, as Arab or a racial "other" instantaneously, blocking her access to any potential social benefits of Whiteness. On the other hand, White and/or non-Arab Americans perceive someone like Zain as White *until* other markers—like Zain's Arabic full name—emerge, which then limits their access to the full extent of White privilege they could benefit from.

Together, Naima's and Zain's contrasting experiences reflect Naber's (2017) description of "racial hinges and loopholes," which deals with "Whiteness and its related logics of exclusion for non-Western groups, and how Whiteness can be intermittently granted and revoked, or mismatched in the law and on the ground" (5). Naber explains that the concept "racial hinges" captures how a "racially liminal group" – in this case Arab-Americans – "can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to Whiteness as necessary," whereas "racial loopholes" describe the conflicts that arise when a group's "legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization" (5). Not only do my participants show evidence of experiencing racial hinges and loopholes, but they also exhibit self-reflection around these racialized experiences.

I also asked some participants how their family discussed race as they were growing up, and how their parents might identify themselves racially. One participant, Basma, described a

situation in which their perception and understanding of Whiteness differed from that of her mother:

> My mom used to tell me we were White. I'd be like "Wait which one do I circle on this form?" and she's like "White." I'm like "we're not White," and she's like "No, we're White." I'm like, we're not White, okay? What else am I supposed to put? Because sometimes it'll [say] "White including Middle Eastern." …that does not feel the same. I feel like Middle Eastern needs to just be its own [category]… the confusing thing about it is American society treats "Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern" as like an "other," but then they're saying we're White.

Basma's statements also align with Naber's arguments. Basma expresses although US institutional entities label Arab and Middle Eastern Americans as "White," Arabs receive different messaging and treatment from broader US society, which assigns them a non-White racial identity. By describing her discussions about race with her mother, Basma adds new layers to this phenomenon. Basma, a second-generation immigrant, experienced the majority of her life in America after the events of 9/11, which "profoundly exacerbated" the racial othering of Arabs and Muslims (Love 2017: 89). Basma has received confusing messaging about her racial status for most of her lifetime, leading her to conclude that most individuals in US society do not perceive her as categorically White. Alternatively, Basma's mom spent most of her life in a pre-9/11 America, and her perceptions about her own racial identity reflect this.

In his review of American Islamophobia before and after 9/11, Love argued that Islamophobia "is best understood as structural racism" with "intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and other axes of inequality" assisting in the "reproduction of Islamophobia" (2017:114). For this reason, he concluded that "race is the only effective theoretical lens to understand Islamophobic discrimination, hate crimes, and discourses as they actually manifest"

(115). The participant quotes I have shared in this section, and my interpretations of them, align with Love's arguments. For the rest of my analysis, I will explore how racialization processes play out within these women's day-to-day social interactions and dating experiences, while also illustrating the ways other aspects of their identities such as gender, sexuality, and religion, are present in those processes.

DATING

Here, I describe three ways that participants' dating decisions offer insight into – and shape— their construction of their racial and ethnic identities. I find that participants created social networks through which they met potential partners, interacted with Islamic ideologies in ways that produce a sense of self-empowerment, and selected partners that with racial identities that paralleled or complemented their own.

Social Network Building

First, women established social networks in order to ensure they were consistently in settings where their dating practices were the norm. They sought out peers that followed the same dating scripts as they did. Participants used similar methods in regard to familial relationships in order to increase the likelihood of cultivating romantic relationships that adhere to either "Western" or "Arab-Muslim" family values, with Western values consisting of independence, privacy, and self-sufficiency, and Arab-Muslim values consisting of collectivism, and family involvement. In crafting these networks, participants established their own social landscapes in ways that solidified their racial-ethnic and religious identities. A clear pattern emerged: women with mostly Arab-Muslim friend groups and high levels of family involvement tended to date exclusively Arab and/or Muslim men, and women with predominantly non-Arab-

Muslim friend groups and lower levels of family involvement tended to date non-Arab and/or Muslim men.

When probed about friend groups, participants described how they selected and maintained their social circles. All participants chose social networks that shared cultural and social interests with them. The women who had majority Arab-Muslim friend groups generally offered deeper reflections on their social circles. These women exhibited awareness of the fact that their social circle was almost exclusively Arab and/or Muslim and described their reasoning for it. For example, Hadeel, a 28-year-old Palestinian woman, had a friend group of mostly Arab and Muslim women. When asked if she intentionally sought out these spaces, Hadeel stated that she did, and elaborated further on this:

> I think I do seek them out. I feel more comfortable around people that are similar to me. Like, for instance, I don't drink, so my leisure activities will typically involve, you know, other things…so like, I think there's a lot of ease in being with people who are similar to me, because there's less of having to explain what you do and why you do it. Everyone just gets it.

Hadeel said she had a hard time discussing her lifestyle choices with those who do not have the context of Muslim values and norms. She opted out of the social and emotional labor of explaining that she does not drink for religious reasons, and instead of adapting her lifestyle choices to the friend group she might find herself in, she consciously chose peers who share a similar lifestyle. Even if she befriended an Arab-Muslim woman who does drink, she would feel secure in the fact that this woman could at least understand her reasons and not probe further. Women who moved closer toward an Arab-Muslim identity did so by situating themselves in peer groups that provided more opportunities for identity confirmation and cementation.

Other participants struggled to create a majority Arab-Muslim network that aligned with their ideologies. These participants navigated social spaces in different ways to establish an ideal peer group. Hanan, a 27-year-old Sudanese woman, stated that up until she was 19, she had a majority-White friend group. Hanan attributed this to the area that she had grown up in. When she went to a university with a more diverse population, she began to form a social network consisting of mostly non-White friends.

> They're not all Muslim, there's a mix in beliefs and religions. But at least there's like, a shared language there or even folks who are adjacent to like, Middle Eastern, Turkish, things like that. I would say the last 8 years that has pretty much made up my friendship circle, or folks who just have immigrant parents from wherever…I would say most of them are Muslim and/or people of color.

Although Hanan is Sudanese Arab and identifies as Black, she described her social circle as mostly consisting of friends who are Middle Eastern, Muslim, and/or immigrants. Hanan could be perceived as Black within a US racial structure, but her cultural and religious identifications take precedence over physical racial markers when forming social bonds. When asked if her current friend circle was an intentional choice, she said that she "does gravitate towards" Arab and Muslim social settings and expressed that it was important for her to bond with others who share similar interests in Arab and Islamic art, music, and media. Hanan was highly involved in Arab-Muslim activist and creative organizations in her area. Hanan's experience exemplifies Omi and Winant's conception of racial formation processes. As a result of racial projects enacted by the state, Arabs and Muslims have been racially categorized based on certain cultural and religious attributes. Because Hanan holds the identities of Arab and Muslim, she has been situated – both by herself and her social landscape - within this racial categorization, and

therefore feels at home in spaces that are collectively Arab and Muslim as opposed to majority-White spaces, or even those made up of mostly non-Muslim people of color. However, Hanan did not default to making connections simply because of a shared Arab and/or Muslim background. Later in the interview, I asked Hanan in which spaces she felt unsafe as an Arab-Muslim woman. She mentioned a local mosque due to its stances on social issues that are meaningful to her:

> I've heard of like, instances of racism, discrimination, misogyny, and folks who have dealt with domestic abuse in these spaces, and their voices have not been escalated. I don't really feel safe in spaces like that, where I feel like folks who are marginalized are not seen

Here, Hanan expressed discomfort with social settings made up of Muslims who approach religious practices differently from her, specifically in ways that she perceived to be dogmatic or oppressive. When asked about spaces in which Hanan felt safe, she said “I think spaces that me and my friends create.” Hanan made it clear that she craved and benefited from a connection with fellow Arabs and/or Muslims, but she also contended with the fact that not all Arab/Muslim-oriented spaces are compatible with her individual Arab-Muslim identity. She combatted this dilemma by carving out these spaces herself.

Similarly, Fatima, a 23-year-old Kuwaiti woman who had moved to the US for education purposes, also had a friend group mostly made up of other Arabs and/or Muslims. Fatima explained, “I just want to be able to speak my own language.” She valued the ability to freely speak in her first language, Arabic, and felt that there were certain sentiments she could not convey through English. However, at another point in the interview, Fatima stated that she sometimes struggled with finding Muslim female friends because of incidents in which she felt

judged by other Muslim women because she was either more religious or less religious than them, especially in terms of clothing choices and dating practices. She explained that she needed to make an effort to find other Muslim women who practiced in the same way as her. Both Hanan and Fatima experienced conflict in cultivating their social networks and had to make conscious decisions on how to move forward. Instead of opting out of an Arab-Muslim friend group when such conflict occurred, participants who moved closer to an Arab-Muslim identity reoriented themselves and selectively curated identity-affirming social networks. Women with majority Arab-Muslim social circles also tended to pursue men of a similar background. Within their curated social networks, these women could seek out partners who share similar interests, values, and cultural and religious understandings.

Other participants had social networks composed mostly of non-Arabs and non-Muslims. These participants had less to say when I asked how and why they selected these friend groups and exhibited less explicit intentionality in forming social bonds based on their racial identity. Zain had a social network made up of mostly White Americans who are, like them, also queer, and explained that this is a result of their location, a city with a relatively small Arab population and a large White, queer community. Zain did not express any intentionality in the makeup of their friend group, and even described the rare friendships they did have with fellow Arabs and/or Muslims as feeling "a little bit different, or a little more special, because there's more to bond over…having similar family experiences and whatnot." Zain valued this unique bond present in friendships with other Arabs and Muslims but did not need this to be the central aspect of their social network as a whole. Their Arab-Muslim identity was not central to their lifestyle decisions. Although Zain expressed attachment to certain aspects of Arab culture, such as collectivism and generosity, they still felt seen and understood by their non-Arab-Muslim

friends. In contrast to Hanan, who intentionally sought out like-minded Arabs and Muslims and carved out community spaces in order to sustain these bonds, Zain did not feel enough of an absence of connection and visibility to prompt them to move closer to an Arab-Muslim identity through social networks.

As discussed previously, Zain's skin tone and facial features do not clearly mark them as Arab-Muslim. People in the US are more likely to perceive participants like Hanan and Fatima as Arab and/or a person of color, they had to contend more heavily with their identification within the US racial schema. Zain, in contrast, was not faced with this social dilemma to the same extent and are therefore able to navigate non-Arab and Muslim spaces with less inner friction.

In short, participants either made intentional choices to situate themselves in Arab-Muslim social networks or made passive choices to not seek out such spaces; the level at which they needed to feel seen in their Arab and Muslim identities dictated the nature of their peer selection. Participants with predominantly Arab-Muslim friend circles tended to exclusively date Arab and Muslim partners, while those with mainly non-Arab-Muslim circles tended to date non-Arabs and non-Muslims. For all participants, the racial, ethnic, and religious makeup of their friend group was consistent with that of their current and past partners.

Consistent patterns emerged in which a participant's friend group also reflected their familial ties. Participants who had majority Arab-Muslim friend groups also consistently displayed tight familial bonds and collectivist sentiments, in line with what they considered Arab-Muslim family norms and values. Fatima described her relationship with her parents as a very close one; although they remained in Kuwait, she spoke with them daily and kept them updated on her life. When discussing her romantic relationship at the time of our interview, Fatima said that her parents did not know she was seeing someone and exhibited distress over

this. She had previously told her parents that she was getting to know this man romantically, and they disapproved initially due to the lack of legitimate commitment, as well as migratory and citizenship status concerns - although Arab and Muslim, he was North African, making potential immigration to the Gulf region difficult. Fatima's parents told her to wait until she graduated from college to discuss this further. She has since graduated and reconnected with this man, and the two of them have expressed more serious commitment to one another. Fatima said that they were planning for the "right time" to discuss the union with her parents and become officially engaged. She expressed hope that by revisiting this discussion with more evidence of the legitimacy of their relationship, her parents will rethink the citizenship issues. When asked what they would do if her parents still disapproved, Fatima said, with certainty, "we would break up."

For Fatima, maintaining harmony with her family and romantic partner was essential. She made it apparent that she planned to eventually move back to Kuwait, or somewhere in the Gulf region, to remain in close proximity to her family. When met with conflict regarding her choice of partner, she chose to navigate this conflict in a way that would best ensure her parents' approval. Instead of hiding the relationship in order to continue it without further external difficulties, she decided to keep it private until she felt it met her parents' standards. Fatima strategically determined when and how to share her relationship with her parents so that she could secure a dynamic in which they can be heavily involved with her future spouse and children. Her parents' approval and involvement in the marriage process is not only important to Fatima for the sake of avoiding conflict, but because she values closeness with her family and the benefits of living in a collectivist community. In this sense, Fatima demonstrates how one can move closer to an Arab-Muslim identity by ensuring their spouse selection aligns with the values of their Arab-Muslim families and communities.

Alternatively, some women chose to not involve their families in their social lives and dating decisions. These participants tended to value independence and freedom in their relationships and placed less value on their family's closeness with their romantic partners. When asked if she involved her family in her day-to-day social life, Basma said:

> Nobody is going to stop me from doing what I want to do, essentially…[my family] doesn't always like, approve…I don't tell them everything, though. Especially if I'm dating someone, I'm not going to talk to them about that, like that's weird... I keep a lot of things to myself. I like to keep my separate lives kind of separate where they are and mixing when need be…Each relationship I have with a person in my life is its own thing.

For Basma, cultivating a romantic partnership that aligned with traditional Arab ideals of collectivist family involvement was not a priority. Instead, she prioritized her privacy and ability to navigate friendships and relationships without familial input. To maintain this privacy and freedom, Basma chose to exclude her family from certain aspects of her daily life. She viewed maintaining harmony with her family as separate from her dating life. Basma described a situation in which she set a clear boundary with a family member:

> One time my grandma told me "If you don't marry a Muslim, I'm not coming to your wedding," and I was like "okay, fine. You're not invited."

Basma was aware of the potential conflict that could arise if she eventually decided to marry a non-Muslim, and rather than adjust her dating strategies to fit familial expectations, she chose to exclude family members who she felt would compromise her autonomy. In this sense, women decentralized their Arab-Muslim identity so that it influenced the outcomes of their dating decisions, allowing for more anonymity and freedom in their romantic and sexual exploration.

In summary, women cultivated social networks through a variety of methods. Participants with majority Arab and/or Muslim friend groups intentionally created and utilized their networks to move closer to a central Arab-Muslim identity and to find potential partners that align with this identity. Participants with majority non-Arab and/or Muslim friend groups decentralized their Arab-Muslim identity, allowing for more anonymity and freedom in dating practices. Participants also chose whether and how much to involve family members in their social networks depending on the centrality of their Arab-Muslim identity and dating aspirations.

Engaging with Islamic Ideologies

Participants engaged with Islamic ideologies in different ways in order to create a sense of empowerment. All participants expressed conflicting feelings regarding religious beliefs and cultural norms. They assigned their own meanings to cultural and religious norms depending on the centrality of their Arab-Muslim identity. Participants moved closer to a perceived Arab-Muslim identity by reinterpreting Arab and Islamic cultural values and expectations - especially those deemed restrictive by Western standards - in ways that felt authentic to their sense of self. In doing so, they effectively recast these values as empowering. Other participants moved away from a perceived Arab-Muslim identity by drawing on negative experiences with cultural and familial expectations in order to legitimize their rejection of these expectations as a self-empowering decision.

This process was evident in both day-to-day and dating practices. In the realm of day-to-day practices, participants who abstained from things deemed *haram* in Islamic scripture, such as immodesty and drinking, framed their decisions within the context of religious devotion. They also, however, shared personal reasons as to why these "rules" resonated. In doing so, they

illustrated how these decisions authentically align with their religious and racial identities. When I asked people why they had chosen to avoid specific practices, they never simply stated "Because it is haram." Instead, they drew upon aspects of their personalities to demonstrate - to themselves and others - that traditional values and expectations offered not only spiritual benefits but also social and emotional benefits. Naima, an 18-year-old hijabi Saudi-Arabian woman, when discussing her feelings about alcohol, explained:

> Even if I wasn't Muslim, I don't think I would drink. It just sounds terrible to me, and I feel like I would rather die than have no control over my body.

Here, Naima framed her decision to abstain from drinking as self-empowering and directly tied to her personal preferences. However, when she talked about wearing the hijab, she described a great deal of familial and internal conflict. Naima had initially started wearing the hijab of her own volition in the eighth grade, but said she stopped halfway through the year due to discomfort and a feeling that the hijab did not "look right" on her. When she and her family moved back to Saudi Arabia for her first two years of high school, her parents pressured her to wear the hijab again because they were now living in a Muslim country. They continued to uphold this expectation after the family moved back to the US. Naima stated that this was a big point of contention which caused frequent fights with her parents. However, she said she had experienced a shift in her feelings towards the hijab within the last year:

> Up until, like the past 6 months…I hated how I looked…and then, I don't know what happened, but something just clicked. A lot of it was finding my personal style, too, because if you wear hijab without your personal style, it's so easy to just look like a sack of potatoes all the time, because you just don't know what to wear…finding personal style was super important in that journey.

Naima did not tie her negative experience to cultural and Islamic expectations, but instead blamed her inability to align the hijab with her identity. When she discovered ways to incorporate her own stylistic preferences while wearing it, wearing hijab became a personal, autonomous choice. Arab Muslim immigrant women must weigh the costs and benefits of choosing whether to embody or reject cultural and familial expectations, and the costs can include alienation from their family and community. In Naima's case, she was able to avoid the cost of conflict with her parents, and the subsequent distancing from them, while simultaneously increasing the benefits of wearing hijab by recasting it as authentic and self-empowering.

In contrast, other Arab Muslim immigrant women decided that the costs of adhering to cultural norms and expectations outweighed the benefits. In these cases, participants talked about negative experiences with these norms and expectations in order to situate their decision to reject these such practices as a way to preserve their independence and autonomy. Sabah, a 24-year-old woman from Egypt, described a similar experience to Naima's, in which her parents had pressured her to wear hijab. However, Sabah navigated this scenario in a different way. Sabah had started wearing hijab as a child but as she went through high school, she started to occasionally take off her hijab and "have fun with it." Eventually, she decided not to wear it at school, but would put it back on during the bus ride home so that her parents would not find out. When asked if her father—a man that she described as exceedingly religious and authoritarian--ever found out about this, Sabah said:

> I don't think he ever found out. Basically, he caught me a couple of times, but I would always just say like "I was fixing it…blah blah blah." My sister took it off and told him, though, and he did get like, kind of upset, and I think he just like stopped talking to her…I mean, that was like his thing, he would just stop talking to us.

During other points of the interview, Sabah discussed her tumultuous relationship with her father. She described the strict, Islamically-oriented rules he imposed on his daughters as being laden with emotional abuse. At the time of our interview, she was not currently in contact with her father. Sabah did not make a direct correlation between Islam and repression, but she did emphasize the nature in which her father practiced the religion. For her, removing the hijab and rejecting orthodox Islamic ideals of modesty allowed for more freedom of expression in ways that felt authentic, and cultivated a sense of empowerment. Sabah attempted to preserve familial ties and avoid conflict by hiding the fact that she was no longer wearing her hijab in public. Yet, her subsequent distancing from her father, as well as his negative reaction to her sister removing her hijab, made it clear that Sabah could not preserve this familial tie while also maintaining her own sense of autonomy.

Later in the interview, she said that she was not against the idea of reconnecting with Islam and Arab culture if she could do so "in her own way," further invoking sentiments of self-empowerment and authenticity. The women in this study exhibit more concern over how Islamic and cultural values align with their identity and sense of self rather than determining whether these values are inherently empowering or disempowering. All participants engaged with religious and cultural expectations in strategic ways, but the strategies were dependent upon their goal of either moving closer to or further away from an Arab Muslim identity.

Participants carried out similar processes in the realm of dating; they chose to either reject or embrace Arab and Islamic cultural expectations around courtship based on what best aligned with their proximity to Arabness or Whiteness. This pattern reflects broader societal racialization processes in which the Muslim identity has become associated with a racial "other." Western thought tends to position Arab dating norms as restrictive and sexually repressive,

especially regarding women. The women in this study had to claim a position vis a vis both Arab-Islamic dating norms and those in the US; when they rejected one, they provided evidence for the logic and efficiency of the other.

Participants who adhered to Arab-Islamic dating and sexual scripts situated their decisions within the context of personal fulfillment. These participants generally self-identified as religiously devout but never explicitly expressed that they abstained from Western dating practices because they believed these practices to be "haram." Instead, they said they rejected aspects of American dating practices they perceived as unfulfilling.

For example, when asked about her thoughts on US hookup culture and premarital sex, Malak, a 27-year-old Palestinian woman, said:

> I feel like you're just setting yourself up for hurt, you know? And I think in that way I'm very like, protective of myself… you can't do that long-term. It's going to get too emotionally exhausting.

Here, Malak referred to casual dating dynamics, in which both parties are expected to refrain from applying labels or expectations to the relationship. Malak viewed these dynamics as inherently unsustainable, with at least one person often a woman - becoming weighed down by the pressure to remain nonchalant and emotionally detached. Malak placed a great deal of importance on emotional intimacy in a partnership and considered relationships without this type of security to be a waste of time. When asked more specifically about premarital sex, Malak stated:

> Obviously, to each their own. Like, It's not my business. I mean, I wouldn't do it because I'm a very - I think for me, I would have to build like an emotional connection with somebody before I let that happen, and to me building an

> emotional connection is always within the context of marriage. So, I probably wouldn't, ever. I'm still a virgin and stuff like that.

Malak did not attach moral significance to the act of premarital sex, but rather framed her decision to abstain as resulting from a process of introspection and determination of her own emotional boundaries. Participants such as Malak pointed to personal characteristics and perceptions of self to bolster their commitment to Arab-Islamic dating method while navigating a social landscape in which such methods are not the norm. They not only recast Arab-Islamic dating practices as empowering but also portrayed hookup culture as oppressive and emotionally reckless.

Hadeel, a 28-year-old Palestinian woman, expressed similar sentiments around casual dating and stated that. She mentioned that she noticed this trend has influenced her generation of Arab and Muslim Americans, with many avoiding commitment due to the "endless possibilities" available through hookup culture. Hadeel contrasted this with older generations of Arabs:

> American culture has made hookup culture a little too casual…a lot of it is really strange because it's trying to dehumanize a very human experience…I think that our parents' generation, although there were a lot of flaws in how they went about things, it was never a joke. It was like, you know, we're doing this, or we're not. So yeah, I'm not a huge fan of hookup culture…. a lot of it is like, "don't apply any label to it, just see where it goes," and some people are not in a place in their life where they want to do that.

Like Malak, Hadeel discussed the perceived emotional consequences of hookup culture and casual sex. She went further by more explicitly linking her decision to abstain from such practices to her Arab ethnic identity. She distanced herself from Western culture by drawing upon older Arabs' experiences to exemplify a courtship process that she deems more practical and likely to yield better results in finding a long-term partner. Participants "switched up" the

narrative by recasting traditional courtship practices as tools for self-preservation and as a way to establish security and mutual respect in romantic relationships.

Participants such as Malak and Hadeel, and others who expressed similar sentiments about dating, identified racially as Arab and almost exclusively date other Arabs and/or Muslims. These participants' decision to center their Muslim identity in dating practices was not just a religious decision, but also an indication of their racial identity, reflecting the racialization of Islam in the context of US society (Love 2017, Maghbouleh 2017). This pattern points to a process in which these women were cementing their Arab racial identity by carrying out the dating norms associated with it. In this sense, they are engaging with a racial narrative – or "racial etiquette" as Omi and Winant phrased it (2014) – which posits that those within an Arab-Muslim racial categorization adhere to certain sexual and romantic scripts rooted in cultural values. As Omi and Winant conceptualized, such "racial etiquettes" dictate interactions based upon, usually physical, racial markers. However, here we see an example of non-physical markers of race which can lead individuals towards the selection of a partner with similar and/or complementary traits. As racial projects around Arabs and Muslims continue to unfold in the US, the women in my study give insights into other indicators of one's racial identification, such as the way they choose to date.

Other participants described their choice to engage in premarital sex and hookup culture as significant in their process of self-discovery. Rather than designate values of abstinence and modesty as inherently repressive, these women explained how their choice to engage in Western dating norms was empowering for them on a personal, individual level. Basma, a 20-year-old Palestinian-American college student, revealed that she has had premarital sex and has participated in hookup culture. She shared that not all her experiences were positive ones. While

she could acknowledge why certain encounters were harmful, she contended that she is "happy with where she is now" in terms of her sexual self:

> Even [with] going through what I went through, I've kind of been liberated from any sexual shame, like I really don't have much anymore, just from my experiences and realizations…and now I just see it as something that can be enjoyable…I'm all about safe sex, like consensual sex, all of these sex-positive things.

Basma alluded to shame around sex which she internalized from messages she received during her upbringing. Instead of situating her negative sexual experiences as confirmation of this shame, she framed these experiences as instrumental in her establishment of a sex-positive outlook. Although they did not explicitly blame Arab-Islamic norms around sex, participants who engaged in premarital sex and hookup culture implied that these norms were stifling by illustrating how rejecting them made room for more sexual and emotional growth. Later in the interview, Basma mentioned that she would not want to marry someone that she has not yet had sex with, indicating that sexual intimacy is necessary for her to develop an emotional connection; in contrast, Malak expressed that the emotional connection formed through marriage is a necessary precursor to sexual intimacy. At the time of our interview, Basma was casually dating a White man. She described the nature of their relationship:

> We're not like "dating-dating" …he's in [another city] and Law school, and I'm here doing theater. So, I'm not going to be like "you're my boyfriend now," because I don't know where I'm going…I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. Like I'm - I like him. He's a cool guy. I like hanging out with him. I like being around him, so you never know.

When asked if she feels that any cultural or racial disconnects with a White, non-Arab-Muslim partner, she stated:

> I don't think that really was ever a factor, like the religious factor. Neither of us are religious. He grew up Catholic, and I obviously grew up Muslim, but neither of us are very religious, so it's like when we're talking about our childhood and growing up, it's more like an anecdotal like kind of [thing], "yeah, this is the way I grew up," "Oh, this is the way you grew up. Okay, cool" …and I think that's because we're both in that same place with religion, or just like cool.

Basma, and participants with similar experiences to hers, tended to date non-Arab-Muslim partners. By decentering her Arab identity in her dating ventures, Basma was able to avoid the potential discomfort of contending with social pressures to embody and maintain the "markers" associated with a perceived Arab racial identity.

In sum, Arab-Muslim women utilized narratives about themselves to explain their stance on sex and dating, and in doing so they positioned themselves in closer proximity to, or further away from, Western dating culture. Engagement with Islamic norms was essential in this process. The state-enacted racial project around Arabs in the US depends on the racialization of the Muslim identity. Participants pointed to this process by discussing how others perceive them, particularly when illustrating how a religious symbol, such as Naima's hijab, also acted as a racial marker. Furthermore, participants assigned their own meanings to Islamic ideologies and traditions in order to craft these narratives and affirm the centrality of their Arab-Muslim racial-ethnic identities.

Strategic Partner Selection

Third, participants selected partners who could assist them in moving closer to or further away from a centralized Arab-Muslim identity.

Participants used their curated social networks and unique situatedness within Islam and Arab cultural values in order to navigate their dating experiences in ways that were self-empowering, practical and emotionally beneficial. All participants in this study exhibited knowledge and awareness of Arab-Muslim cultural and religious expectations around dating and marriage, but they engaged with these expectations according to their personal familial and lifestyle aspirations.

Some participants exclusively dated Arab-Muslim men in an effort to secure a future family structure that would be distanced from Whiteness. These women explicitly expressed how they wanted to raise children with their future spouse in a way that maintained close proximity to their Arab and Muslim identities; they also aimed to avoid becoming Westernized in the process. Naima, although only 18 years old at the time of our interview, had already begun considering how she might maintain her future children's cultural and religious identities. When asked whether she plans to raise her children in the US or in the MENA region, she stated:

> I mean, I definitely don't want them to fully grow up here, because I've seen Arab girls that have fully grown up here and it's just like, it's such a loss of identity…like they go to school and they change into shorts because their mom won't let them wear shorts…and I feel bad for girls like that, because they know what their culture is, but I feel like they're so disconnected from it, and it's no one's fault, really. It's just the circumstances they're in. And I think that's why I would want my kids to live somewhere in the Arab world for some time at least, because I can't imagine having White -washed kids…I would not want my kids to want to be White at any point in their lives.

Here, Naima explicitly distances herself from Whiteness by assigning racialized and cultural meaning to clothing choices. She attributes the rejection of Arab-Muslim values to an individual's wish to become Westernized and situate themselves in proximity to Whiteness. By doing so, she draws a clear line between her own Arab-Muslim identity and the Western-White

identity. The use of the word “White” is significant. Her use of this term indicates a racialized distinction as opposed to a cultural or religious one; she casts the rejection of Arab-Muslim values of modesty as a form of “White -washing.” At other points during the interview, Naima made it clear that she planned to eventually marry a Muslim man. Naima was not only concerned with her potential spouse’s religious identity, but also his racial and ethnic identity. Although a man of Western descent could convert to Islam, Naima, she said she felt that someone from outside the MENA region would lack cultural understanding. This further illustrates the centering of race – rather than religion or national origin – as a determinant of Naima’s future partner selection.

Amal, a 23-year-old Sudanese woman, differed from Naima in that she did not exclusively pursue Arab-Muslim men, but still expressed goals of marrying someone with a similar cultural and religious background to her own. Amal had dated men of various backgrounds. She did not generally adhere to traditional Arab-Muslim standards of courtship and had engaged in hookup culture and casual dating. However, when asked about her future marital and familial aspirations, Amal stated that she would prefer to eventually settle down with a partner with Arab and Muslim roots, and that she hoped to raise her children with Arab-Muslim cultural values. She was able to explore varying dating norms and sexual scripts, and could identify with aspects of her American upbringing, but maintained the end-goal of cultivating an Arab-Muslim-aligned family structure and preserving her identity across generations.

Some women discussed their efforts to preserve and center their Arab-Muslim identity by rejecting standards of Whiteness in areas other than child rearing. When discussing her reasons for choosing to date exclusively Arab-Muslim men, Fatima brought up conversations she had with friends who believed that men with European features were the most attractive. She

expressed annoyance with these opinions and said that she considered Arab men to be far more physically attractive; “Sorry, but I want an *Arab* man.” Fatima’s emphasis on the word “Arab” conveyed her preference for physical features that have been racialized as typically Arab. She distanced herself from Whiteness by rejecting Eurocentric beauty standards and expressing disdain toward conversations that had perpetuated Eurocentric standards of attractiveness.

The women in this study solidified their identities by drawing upon experiences in which they felt seen or unseen by romantic partners. Participants who moved closer toward an Arab-Muslim identity expressed how they needed their cultural background to be understood and validated by their partners. When asked about the racial-ethnic and religious backgrounds of her previous romantic partners, Hanan said that she had mostly dated Arab and/or Muslim men but mentioned that she had gone on one date with a non-Arab, non-Muslim man. The two met at a restaurant, and Hanan noticed bacon on her dish after it was served to her. She notified the server and asked if the dish could be replaced. Her date was aware that she was Muslim, and Hanan assumed he knew she could not consume pork for this reason. However, he told Hanan she was “making such a big deal” by complaining to the server, which caused her to feel that a deeper connection would not be possible. After this experience, Hanan decided that she would no longer pursue men from Western backgrounds. She said:

> So yeah, I was like, I'm just gonna go back to [what I know]. So, that's kind of where I am. And I would still like to be with someone who's Muslim for the religious parts, but I think it's even more just like the cultural aspect of it. I want someone who I don't have to explain stuff to, who just like understands fasting, or like why I don't want to do this thing, or we just have a similar foundation…So much of [being] in this country, is explaining yourself. And I don't want to do that in my relationship. I want it to be a safe space where I can land.

Here, Hanan indicates how she is moving closer toward an Arab-Muslim identity by emphasizing the significance of shared cultural understanding in her romantic relationship. This man was biracial – Black and White – with features that would be coded as Black within a US racial schema. Hanan is Sudanese and is therefore also coded as Black in many social spaces. While the two may share similar racial experiences based on phenotypical features, they did not bond over this. Instead, Hanan's identity as a Sudanese Muslim woman took precedence in this scenario. This illustrates the varying dimensions to Hanan's identity; her Arab and Muslim identities were more salient in this instance, highlighting the racial dilemma at play (Love 2017). Because her Arab-Muslim identity is central in her day-to-day life, Hanan chooses partnerships in which this identity can remain visible and be maintained. She opts out of the emotional labor of explaining her values and beliefs by seeking out relationships in which an understanding of such values and beliefs is already in place from the start.

I observed that participants who more explicitly racially identified as Arab almost exclusively dated other Arabs and/or Muslims. Arabs and Muslims in the US, currently situated within a murky racial categorization, establish a racial identity by sorting through the mixed messaging received in day-to-day interactions within a Western social landscape. Arab and Muslim Americans internalize racialized schemas through others' perceptions and choose whether to affirm or reject the racial identifiers assigned to them. They must contend with what it means to be "White" versus "Arab." Depending upon the meanings they internalize and how they align with those meanings, Arab and Muslim Americans can affirm their identities through mate selection.

Alternatively, some participants sought out partnerships in which other aspects of their identity could become more salient. In these cases, they de-centered their Arab-Muslim identity so that it was not a determining factor in their relationship dynamic. These women tended to follow Western dating patterns and sexual scripts, and their Arab-Muslim identity was not central in their day-to-day life. Nour, a 26-year-old queer, Jordanian woman, had been dating her girlfriend - a White American woman - for 3 years at the time of our interview. When asked about her dating history, Nour reflected upon the fact that, although her parents had encouraged her to do so, she had never dated an Arab man. She described common attributes of Arab masculinity which she considered unappealing within the context of a relationship, and explained:

> Part of the reason I've loved dating women is because it feels soft and warm and caring. I feel taken care of and seen. Those are all things that [are] really important to me in a relationship…but something that I recognize is it's kind of hard to find that in a man, especially in Arab men…I know that's a huge generalization. But like, I know some Arab men like that.

Nour not only points to her attraction toward women as a reason for avoiding Arab partners, but also describes other distinct aspects of a partner, regardless of gender, that were important to her. Dating an Arab man would mean contending with the fact that her sexuality and dating history may not align with his beliefs and values. For Nour, her queer female identity was more salient than the Arab-Muslim aspect of her identity. Because queerness is considered *haram* in the Islamic faith, friction arises when a queer individual tries to carve out space for their queerness while also attempting to center their Arab-Muslim identity; they are put in a position where they must decide which facet of their identity will be more salient. As discussed previously, Islam is heavily centered in the ongoing racial project around Arab-Americans, and this religious

orientation has been racialized. Like Nour, some people may choose to de-center their Arab-Muslim identity within romantic relationships in order to avoid the discomfort involved in reconciling their sexuality and religious identity.

Other participants discussed undesirable traits of Arab men. All participants' dating decisions were informed, to some extent, by their prior experiences with Arab men and their gendered performances. Most participants referenced or joked about aspects of hegemonic Arab masculinity, and all expressed how they wanted to avoid these traits in romantic partners. Nour and Basma's previous negative interactions with Arab men informed their decision to avoid dating Arab men or to be more meticulous when evaluating Arab men's characteristics. Participants who exclusively dated Arab-Muslim men also referenced hegemonic Arab masculinity but described these traits in different ways. After determining which traits they found to be undesirable in Arab men, theses strategically utilized this knowledge in order to seek out the *right* Arab-Muslim man. Fatima, when discussing her preferences in a partner, described a conversation she had with her partner regarding their potential marriage:

> Some guys expect, when you get married to them, you start wearing the hijab or something… but I was like "don't expect me to do this," I wear shorts sometimes, and tank-tops, and I'll continue to wear this if we are together, I will wear whatever I like...because a lot of [Arab] guys, they don't like that…that would probably be a deal-breaker [for me].

Here, Fatima notes that many Arab men expect their wives to adhere to traditional Muslim ideals of modesty. Instead of choosing to not date Arab-Muslim men, she chose to continue dating Arab-Muslim men while clearly communicating her boundaries around this particular topic. Fatima not only values a partner with a shared cultural and religious background but one who engages with Arab and Islamic culture in the same ways she does. She can move closer to an

Arab-Muslim identity by navigating dating in ways that will cultivate relationship dynamics that authentically align with her perception of self as an Arab-Muslim woman. Other participants who dated Arab-Muslim men or planned to eventually start a family with an Arab-Muslim man, had to grapple with conflicting notions about these men.

In sum, some participants exclusively dated Arab and/or Muslim men in order to secure a future family structure that is distanced from Whiteness. Conversely, other participants dated outside of the Arab-Muslim community in order to move further away from aspects of Arab Muslim identity they deemed constricting. Regardless of who they tended to date, all participants expressed conflicting feelings about Arab masculinity. Those who chose to exclusively date within the Arab-Muslim community did so by implementing dating strategies aimed at finding Arab-Muslim men whose ideologies aligned with their own. All participants expressed a need for their identity to be seen and reaffirmed by their romantic partners. They selected partners that aid in the process of moving closer to or further away from a centralized Arab-Muslim identity.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the literature on racial identity formation among Arab-Muslim immigrant women by examining how they navigate social landscapes and seek romantic partners. These women make strategic dating decisions that not only reflect their racialized identities but also influence and shape them. Arab-Muslim women cultivate social networks that help them to pursue romantic relationships that align with their racial-ethnic identity. They assign meaning to Islamic and Arab cultural norms in ways that are self-empowering and aligned with their proximity to, or distance from, Whiteness. With the use of these strategies, they select

partners that can assist them in moving closer to or further away from their Arab-Muslim identities.

In line with prior research, my findings show how romantic relationships shape people's racial identity formation. Scholars have done similar research on other immigrant communities (Acosta 2013) but have rarely included Arab-Muslim immigrant women in these analyses. My findings not only fill gaps in the inclusion of Arab-Muslim women in this vein of research, but also provide insights into the racialization of religious identities. At several points in the interview and coding processes, the conflation of "Muslim" and "non-White" emerged as a consistent theme; this aligns with previous studies in which researchers argue that, at its core, Islamophobia is a racial problem (Love 2017, Maghbouleh 2017).

I centered Arab-Muslim immigrant women in this study because of the unique racial position they occupy. Previous research shows that Arab and Muslim Americans experience a fluid and contested identity in which there is no official "name for the socially constructed racial category that has been used to collectively ascribe" this group (Love 2017:5). They are treated as non-White, racial "others" in day-to-day social interactions, but are not clearly named as such in institutional spaces. By focusing on a group with an especially dynamic racial identity, this study helps detangle how day-to-day social interactions shape Arab-Muslim immigrant women's racial identity. My study also responds to Cheng's (2014) call to bridge immigration research with racial formation theory by highlighting race as an as an "autonomous, changing condition within the American immigration context" (749).

The participants in my study shared the confusing messaging they received about their racial status, particularly when discussing the US census and other forms that ask for racial identification. They used terms such as "White" or "not White" to describe how others perceived

them, effectively pointing to the racialization of the Arab-Muslim identity in US society. In our discussions about dating, participants revealed the unique ways they navigate this social terrain in ways that are empowering; they made certain aspects of their identity more or less salient depending on the social context. For example, some participants' Muslim and/or cultural identity was more salient in partner selection practices, such as Hanan and Naima. For others, their queerness was more salient, like Zain and Nour. In all cases, these women displayed some level of reflection about their racial identities and how these identities shape their social interactions.

Limitations of this study indicate room for future research. Firstly, my sample did not allow me to analyze in detail how immigrant status – for example, whether a person was a first- or second-generation immigrant — shaped people's racial identities. I touched on this point a few times throughout this paper and named it as one of the various axes of identity that can impact racial formation processes. My findings indicate a pattern in which first-generation participants tended to more explicitly distance themselves from Whiteness, and second-generation participants revealed more instances in which non-Arab and non-Muslim aspects of their identity became more salient. However, I would need a larger sample and an updated interview guide with more questions about immigration history in order to provide a more thorough analysis of this phenomenon.

In addition, my study did not capture how participants' class status influenced their racial identity formation and dating experiences. I recorded participants' job titles during interviews, but did not ask questions that would allow me to assess respondents' socioeconomic status, both here in the US and in their country of origin. In much of the MENA region, the extent of one's Westernization is tied to a higher-class status. A family's class status in their country of origin may correlate with a more "Western" mindset, or proximity to Whiteness, which can shape their

racialized social interactions after immigrating to the US. I would address this in future research by investigating the socioeconomic status of participants and their families in their respective countries of origin.

Lastly, although queerness emerged as an important theme during the coding and interpretation process, a deeper analysis of queerness as it relates to racial identity and dating experiences was outside the scope of this study. In my sample of only 10 participants, 4 identified as queer, which is a sizable portion. My findings reveal sexual orientation as a facet of one's identity that became more salient in certain social contexts, but I did not thoroughly explore how queerness operates in the racialization processes I discussed in this study. I hope to expand on this in future research with a larger sample and place more emphasis on how queerness influences Arab-Muslim immigrant women's dating practices and racial status.

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