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SPECIAL SECTION
On Religious and Spiritual Themes in Sexuality Research

Religious Faith and Heterosexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration of Young Adults

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Abstract

This paper examines the understandings and practices of 515 heterosexual religious young adults living in the United Kingdom in terms of their religious faith and sexuality. It presents qualitative and quantitative data drawn from questionnaires, interviews, and video diaries. Four themes are explored. First, participants generally understood sexuality in relation to sacred discourses. Second, regardless of gender and religious identification, the participants drew from religious (e.g. religious community) and social (i.e. friends) influences to construct their sexual values and attitudes. Third, the religious and familial spaces within which the participants inhabited were structured by heteronormative assumptions. Thus, the participants must negotiate dominant norms, particularly those pertaining to marriage and sex within it. Finally, the paper focuses on married participants, offering insights into their motivations for, and experiences of, marriage. Overall, the paper demonstrates that, like their lesbian and gay counterparts, heterosexual religious young adults also had to manage various competing and mutually-reinforcing sexual and religious norms in constructing a meaningful life.

Keywords

Heterosexuality – multi-faith – sexuality – religious faith – heteronormativity – marriage

The proliferating research interest in the intersection of religion and sexuality is an indisputable fact. Indeed, the burgeoning corpus of research literature consistently demonstrates that the outcomes of this intersection are diverse and challenges the dominant discourse that religion is inherently restrictive, and oppressive of, sexuality. In particular, research on sexual and gender *Others* (e.g. women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people) demonstrates that while experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and rejection in religious spaces are still a real everyday experience, many members of such minorities are transforming such spaces, theologically and institutionally, often empowered by legislative and social progress (e.g. Browne, Munt, & Yip, 2010; Hamzić, 2012; Hunt & Yip, 2012; Shannahan, 2012; Wilcox, 2012a, 2012b; Yip & Nynäs, 2012).

This paper focuses on the views and experiences of 515 self-defined heterosexual religious young adults living in the United Kingdom, in order to offer an in-depth analysis of the intersection between heterosexuality and religious faith. We choose to focus on heterosexuality exclusively rather than the more commonly examined and contentious topic of non-heterosexuality (particularly homosexuality, and to a lesser extent, bisexuality) in order to problematize the hegemonic and naturalized status of heterosexuality. By doing so, we want to de-focus the often disproportionate attention on the issue of homosexuality, and put under scrutiny heterosexuality as an unchallenged norm. This paper will demonstrate that, despite its normative status, heterosexuality is understood and lived out by young adults in a contested and negotiated fashion, often characterized by ambivalence and contingency.

In spite of the increasing social visibility, media representation, and political voice of the lesbian and gay population, research continues to suggest that society in general is still firmly characterized by heteronormativity. This means that, at the micro, meso, and macro levels of social life, heterosexuality is institutionalized, through explicit propagation and implicit assumption in social and policy values and praxis, as the standard template for legitimate, normal, and productive social, and especially sexual and gender relations (Chambers, 2007; Ingraham, 2005). The normative status of heterosexuality, leading to the establishment, circulation, and perpetuation

of *the heterosexual assumption* (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001), infuses the everyday production, circulation, and consumption of media images, language, symbols, as well as social, cultural, and political relations. Therefore, heteronormativity is a cultural ideology and a set of institutional practices, informing individual thought and praxis (Ahmed, 2006a, 2006b; Hockey, Meah, & Robinson, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Scott, 2010). Its power and entrenchedness lies in its mundaneness, and its ordinary silence belies its extraordinary loudness. This leads to what Ingraham calls the *heterosexual imaginary*, namely:

> [T]he way of thinking that conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution. The effect of this depiction of reality is that heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned…(1994, p. 203)

In a nutshell then, heterosexuality, compared to homosexuality, "was a love that did not need to dare to speak its name. It just was" (Weeks, 2011, p.79). We would expand Week's assertion by arguing that this is particularly relevant for institutional religious spaces. There is no denying that, compared to secular spaces, religious spaces lag far behind in embracing (legislatively and normatively) the reality of sexual diversity and difference. In other words, religious institutions often remain the last bastion in defending the naturalness, normality, hegemony and moral authority of heterosexuality (e.g. Crockett & Voas, 2003; Donald, 2012; Trappolin, Gasparini, & Wintemute, 2012; Trigg, 2012; Yip & Nynäs, 2012). Within the British context, the controversy surrounding the passing of the Marriage (Same-sex Couples) Bill in 2013 is an example par excellence. Not surprisingly, the strongest opposition to the Bill emanated from conservative segments of religious spaces, whose discourse indisputably demonstrated a heteronormative positioning. Indeed, marriage is a key symbol of heterosexuality, and its importance within many religious spaces continues to be upheld (Aune, 2006; Heath, 2009; Hidayatullah, 2003; Rait, 2005; Sharma, 2011). This paper will therefore explore the specific ways through which marriage is privileged in participants' accounts, demonstrating how heterosexuality, marriage, and religion intersect. This prioritization of marriage by our religious participants comes at a time when marriage in the broader context has been seemingly demoted (Weeks, 2007).

Precisely because of its uncontested and unquestioned nature, heterosexuality (compared to homosexuality) has not explicitly attracted as much attention

from scholars, particularly scholars of religion, who study the intersection of religion and sexuality. In some ways, this paper aims to fill this gap, through examining how heterosexuals experienced heterosexuality and demonstrating that heteronormative processes and structures affect everybody, regardless of her/his sexual identification. Heterosexuality has to be negotiated not only by sexual *Others* (e.g. lesbian and gay people) but also by those who define themselves as heterosexual and therefore assume a hegemonic and legitimate status conferred by a heteronormative culture. Therefore, this paper will show that heterosexual religious young adults, like their lesbian and gay counterparts (see Yip & Page, 2013), also have to negotiate and navigate risks and opportunities. This journey of negotiation and re-negotiation is informed by multiple religious and secular discourses. In this respect, their religious faith has enabling but also constraining potentials.

Using the stories of religious young adults as a starting point, the terrain of heterosexuality is explored through four empirical themes. We shall begin by discussing the participants' understandings of sexuality to highlight the ways in which heterosexuality was comprehended and understood in relation to religion. This is followed by an analysis of the significant sources which contribute to their construction of sexual values and attitudes. The four sources fall under two inter-related categories: religious and social. The final two themes focus more explicitly on how participants experienced heterosexuality (and heteronormative scripts) in their everyday religious lives. We shall explore how heterosexuality was often coded and discussed specifically in relation to marriage, especially within religious spaces. Therefore, in the third theme, we shall examine the broader context within which the participants lived, such as the family and the religious community, in order to show the entrenched and uncontested heteronormative nature of such spaces, expressed and reinforced through religious and secular discourses particularly on marriage. Finally, we shall discuss why married participants decided to marry and how they managed the everyday reality of married life.

The project had three broad aims: to examine (a) the meanings underpinning participants' identities (e.g. what it means to be "Buddhist," "heterosexual"); (b) the significant factors that informed the construction of such identities (e.g. religious faith, friendship network, family, youth culture); and (c) the strategies they developed to manage the intersection of these identities in the everyday context (e.g. management of the potential tension between heteronormative religious teachings on sexuality and the participants' actual sexual practices).

Method

Participants

The heterosexual participants' religious self-identifications include: Christian (298; 57.9%), Muslim (97; 18.8%), Hindu (41; 8%), Jewish (32, 6.2%), Sikh (19; 3.7%), mixed-faith (16; 3.1%), and Buddhist (12; 2.3%). Women constituted just over two-thirds (358; 69.5%) of the sample. Furthermore, 315 participants (61.4%, $N = 513$) self-defined as White and 386 (76.0%, $N = 508$) were students. In terms of relationship status, 335 (65.2%) participants were single, 155 (30.2%) were in partnered and unmarried relationships, and 21 (4.1%, $N = 514$) were married. In terms of religious orientation, 210 (43.7%) of the sample defined themselves as *liberal* or *very liberal*, and 131 (27.2%), *conservative* or *very conservative* ($N = 481$).

We acknowledge the unrepresentative nature of our sample. As with all social research with specific aims, operating under time and financial constraints, we did not utilize certain criteria for sampling purposes such as class and socio-economic status, which could have an impact in structuring lived experiences of young adults in contemporary society (e.g., Furlong & Cartmel, 2008; Furlong, 2009). Therefore, we would caution against generalizing our findings across the religious young adult population in the UK and elsewhere. Nonetheless, we would argue that our study's substantial sample size and the extensive and in-depth data it has generated offer significant and illuminating insights into contemporary young adults' religious and sexual identities. The multi-faith nature of this study is also particularly significant, as most research in this area focuses on one single religion, especially Christianity. We trust that this multi-faith dimension offers a more nuanced and richer picture about contemporary religious and sexual identities amongst young adults.

Measures

The project adopted a mixed-method research design, generating quantitative and qualitative data through three methods: (a) online questionnaires; (b) individual face-to-face interviews; and (c) video diaries, recorded over a period of approximately 7 days. The online questionnaire contained 38 questions, organized into seven sections: *About You*; *Religion*; *Sexuality*; *Religion and Gender*; *Religion and Sexuality*; *Being Religious in a Secular Society*; and *Finally*. We formulated all the open-ended and closed-ended questions ourselves, guided by the research aims. The questionnaire is published in full in Yip & Page (2013). It was designed using Survey Monkey and was hosted on its website, which was directly linked to the project website and its Facebook page

(for more details about this method, see Keenan, Yip, & Page, in press; Yip & Page, 2013). Items included statements such as "Religion is a force for good in the world," "My religion gives me a connection to my community," and "My religion is the only true religion," which participants rated on a 6-point Likert scale, with anchors of *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Additional items asked participants to identify up to five factors that influenced sexual practices, with a total of 11 choices given, including "Your religious faith," "Your parents/care-givers," "Your friends," and "Electronic media (e.g., TV)" as options.

Procedure

We employed diverse sampling strategies to maximize participant variability, which included: publicity postcards/posters/e-mails to a wide range of groups such as university religious and cultural student groups, cultural associations, and support groups for sexual minorities; snowball sampling, personal networks, advertisements in printed and online media, a project website, as well as a Facebook page. Therefore, the participants of this study constitute an unrepresentative heterogeneous purposive sample (Spencer & Pahl, 2006) that is based on two key criteria, mentioned in all publicity printed and online material: religious self-identification (specifically Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Buddhist: this reflects the six major religions in the UK, consistently shown in the Census of 2001 and 2011, and any combination of these labels [i.e. mixed-faith]); as well as sexual self-identification. Unlike religious identification, we did not specify any sexual identification labels in the publicity material and relied solely on participants' self-definitions, in order to maximize diversity in this respect.

Aiming to maximize participant variability, the interviewed sub-sample was constructed on the basis of, for instance, religious identification, sexual identification, gender, and (non)participation in religious community. Each interview, lasting about 2 hours, used the participant's completed questionnaire and an interview guide as the basis for conversation. Using similar criteria, a sub-sample was constructed from the interviewed participants for the video diary method, in which a user-friendly digital video camera was posted to the participant to record her/his mundane and significant reflections on her/his everyday life, ideally over a period of 7 consecutive days, with a maximum of 2 hours of recording in total. As this method was designed to be participant-led, and it aimed to generate not only anonymized textual data but also visual data, only minimal written guidelines were provided (for more details about these two methods, see Yip & Page, 2013). Overall, the fieldwork of these three stages of data collection took place between May 2009 and November 2010.

As the project covers a wide range of issues that we cannot possibly discuss in full within the space of this paper, we shall focus on the above-mentioned themes, based exclusively on the perceptions and lived experiences of 515 heterosexual participants, all of whom completed an online questionnaire respectively. In addition, 34 of them were interviewed and 13 completed the video diaries (for a detailed discussion of the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants of our study, on which this paper does not focus, see e.g. Yip, Keenan, & Page, 2011; Yip & Page, 2013).

The data underpinning the discussion here are drawn from all three datasets. The percentages we present are calculated based on the valid responses to specific questions in the online questionnaire, analyzed using SPSS. The qualitative data was drawn from the questionnaire, the interviews and the video dairies, analyzed using a thematic approach to tease out the diverse meanings articulated, and produce a coding frame with multiple categories. Where applicable, each quote this paper presents ends with an indication of the data source. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Results

Heteronormative Understandings of Sexuality

One specific open-ended question in the questionnaire: "What does your sexuality mean to you?" (in the *Finally* section) was designed to offer the participants the space to articulate their meanings of sexuality. We also asked another question: "What does your religion mean to you?" The findings are not relevant to this paper, but a detailed discussion can be found in Yip and Page (2013). The vast majority of the overall sample answered this question, producing responses ranging from one sentence to a full paragraph of different lengths. We analyzed these responses by utilizing a thematic approach to tease out the diverse meanings articulated. As Guest, MacQueen, and Namey asserted, thematic analysis involves a "focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data" (2012, p. 10), offering a good way of accessing the nuance and detail embedded within individuals' accounts. Utilizing such a broad open-ended question in relation to sexuality allowed scope for new themes to emerge which were not tied to the predilections of the researchers, although it is to be acknowledged that coding data into themes is not a process that begins out of nowhere but is embedded in previous literature and knowledge generated (Grogan, Gill, Brownbridge, Kilgariff, & Whalley, 2013; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2006). Here, we would like to highlight the three most commonly-articulated and inter-related meanings of sexuality: a gift from God,

opposite-sex attraction, and expression strictly within the context of marriage.

Nonetheless, before exploring these categories of meanings, we must also acknowledge that many participants wrote about the difficulty in articulating any meanings regarding their sexuality, indicating that it was not an issue about which they were particularly reflective within the everyday context. The following quotes illustrate this:

> Nothing. I've never thought about it; it's just what it is!
>
> MEGAN, Christian woman

> I have honestly never thought much about what it means to be heterosexual.
>
> LARA, Jewish woman

The one-liners above clearly illustrate the participants' telling responses to the request to articulate the meaning of their sexuality. The hesitancy and tentativeness in the responses reflect that sexuality, particularly their own heterosexuality, was not a matter at the forefront of their everyday reflection of life. Indeed, they seemed to lack the awareness of it and the language to express it.

Consistent with what we have argued in the introduction, the lack of articulateness or even silence these participants experienced reflects the uncontested and unquestioned nature of heterosexuality. While lesbian and gay people, particularly within religious spaces, have to constantly justify, defend, and negotiate their sexualities (e.g. Browne et al., 2010; Hunt & Yip, 2012; Nynäs & Yip, 2012), heterosexual people generally do not have to do that. This indisputably reflects the normative status of heterosexuality: the normalized and naturalized nature of heterosexuality in the everyday discourse of sexuality and social life, in both religious and secular spheres (e.g. Dickey Young, Shipley, & Trothen, in press; Yip & Page, 2013). What is not articulated and contested is just as significant as what is. Thus, the unsaid, paradoxically, could speak as voluminously as the said. The silence of heterosexuality, reflected in these participants' difficulty in articulating it, evinces its status as the foundational and organizing principle of everyday cultural and social relations. Its seemingly subaltern and mundane nature belies the fact that it actually permeates every nook and cranny of the social fabric (e.g. Hockey et al., 2007; Ingraham, 2005).

Amongst participants who did articulate their understandings of sexuality, one of the most common ways of conceptualizing it was as a gift from God, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> Sexuality is a wonderful gift from God, by which a man and woman mirror the image of the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity: "In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them…For this reason a man shall leave his parents and be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."
>
> SAM, Christian man

> It is a gift from god which I have to protect, fulfil, and enjoy.
>
> ZAYNAB, Muslim woman

The quotes above reflect the participants' acknowledgement of the origin of their sexuality, which was tied to the origin of their own being and to life itself. This narrative is particularly pertinent to participants embracing monotheistic religions (specifically, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) with a prominent creation narrative which underpins the discourse of the origin and "createdness" of life itself. Thus, sexuality was conceived to be part of the wholeness of an individual's life and humanity.

Zaynab's quote also denotes individual responsibility to protect and honor the gift and by so doing honoring God as the gift-giver. This sense of obligation and responsibility is expressed even more strongly in the following quotes:

> Sexuality is one part of how God made me. I am looking forward to enjoying sex when I am married; it is a way of expressing our love for one another and thanking God for the gift that He has given us. However, my relationship with my fiancée is built on so much more than that, and I would not want sexuality to play a bigger part in our marriage than it should. It should not distract me from loving God and putting Him first!
>
> BRAD, Christian man

> My sexuality is part of my identity and is vital to my life with my girlfriend. Our sexuality makes the relationship we share that little bit closer and different from my relationships with anyone else. My sexuality is important to God, me, and my girlfriend and is a wonderful gift that brings the three of us together.
>
> WILL, Christian man

This notion of responsibility raises two significant issues about the appropriate expression of one's sexuality: relational parties (e.g. the gendered and sexed body with whom one expresses one's sexuality) and relationship context (e.g. within marriage). Both these issues are contentious, because they

are infused with religiously-informed moral undertones. The issue of relational parties directly relates to the significant issue of sexuality type itself. To some people, homosexuality is morally wrong precisely because the coupling of the relational parties, the same gendered and sexed bodies, is considered inappropriate, against nature and/or God's creation (we shall elaborate on this below). Conversely, the coupling of opposite-sex relational parties is deemed acceptable; thus heterosexuality is idealized, romanticized, and hegemonized.

Nonetheless, the appropriate coupling of relational parties is insufficient to make the sexual expression right. The context within which the expression takes place is also crucial, a point we shall develop further below. Altogether, we can see that some participants who viewed their sexuality as part and parcel of their God-given humanity also acknowledged their obligation to express this gift meaningfully and responsibly. This raises the issue about sexual purity and propriety. Significantly, the individual herself/himself plays a significant role, with spiritual and religious community support, in disciplining and controlling her/his body and bodily desires in order to achieve such purity (Sharma, 2011, 2012; White, 2012). Indeed, Brad's and Will's quotes reflect the privileging of opposite-sex relational parties in the enactment of sexuality within the context of marriage: a religiously-sanctioned union that hegemonizes heteronormativity itself.

This kind of heteronormative understanding of sexuality is reflected even more explicitly in the case of some participants who defined their sexuality strictly within the parameters of heterosexuality. This second primary conceptualization emphasizes opposite-sex attraction as well as sexual expression, as the following quotes illustrate:

> Having sex with opposite sex.
>> IMRAN, Muslim man

> It means I'm heterosexual.
>> MOSES, Jewish man

Some responses also reveal the religiously-informed foundations of this opposite-sex attraction and expression: the creation discourse and the nature discourse. The following quotes demonstrate this:

> My sexuality…being heterosexual means a lot. The best way to say it would be "It's the way of nature."
>> JAMILAH, Muslim woman

> Being heterosexual is my belief and [it is] important to me as I see it as an ideal and most accepted relationship type. I feel this is because it is the way God made us, partners that are men and women create offspring which is how we are born.
>
> RANJEET, Sikh woman

The quotes above demonstrate the participants' unequivocal and firm belief in the creation and nature discourses, highlighting the sacred nature of their sexuality as willed by God. This creation discourse of course also undergirds the naturalization of heterosexuality. In fact, heterosexuality was considered as natural not only because it was part of creation but also because it facilitated procreation. The responsibility for, and capability in, procreation constitutes the basis of the moral rectitude and supremacy of heterosexuality. In these quotes, the definition of one's sexuality is coupled with the implicit assertion of the hegemonic and normative status of heterosexuality, buttressed by its ability to procreate, which itself was perceived as a responsibility of humanity. The mutually-constitutive and mutually-reinforcing capacity of the creation discourse and the nature discourse transcends scientific biologism. In other words, what is considered normal and natural is understood as having a biological but also, perhaps more significantly, a religious and theological basis.

As we have discussed above, some participants acknowledged the importance of expressing their sexuality responsibly precisely because it was a gift from God. This means that it should be expressed not only heterosexually but also strictly within the context of marriage. Therefore, marriage was conceptualized as the appropriate context where inter-personal sexual expression was in line with what they believed God intended. Marriage, as a union of opposite-sex gendered and sexed bodies, accords the moral authority for sex to be enjoyed and celebrated. The following quotes confidently articulate such commitment and the rationale for it:

> I am totally comfortable with my sexuality and the decisions I have made in relation to my attitudes and practices towards sex. I am saving sex for my wedding night and looking forward to it! Sex in the right context is incredibly positive and should be celebrated.
>
> JULIA, Christian woman

> It's vital, and should be enjoyed inside marriage. Sex is an expression of God's joy in creating people. The joy people get from sex is a picture of how much God delights in what he has made.
>
> PHIL, Christian man

The above quotes show the participants' view about the inappropriateness, and indeed wrongness, of other contexts as harmful and unedifying for sexual expression. Therefore, from this perspective, the commitment to sexual abstinence before marriage was more than an issue of management of one's sexuality; it was also an issue of spiritual discipline and growth (Gardner, 2011; Uecker, 2008; White, 2012; Williams, 2011; Yip & Page, 2013). Of course, this does not mean that marriage itself is a challenge-free context where sexuality is managed, an issue we shall expand later on in this paper.

Not all participants agreed with the sex within marriage only norm. For some, there was no religious imperative to save sex for marriage. For example, Rosie, a Buddhist woman, argued in the interview:

> I don't feel like there are certain rules. It's always what I feel to be truthful in a certain situation, whether I'm acting in a way that's going to be harming other people, acting in a way that's just for my own personal neurotic pleasure or whether. I'm going to be acting in a way that's going to be positive. So I've always got to think about that rather than thinking about a certain rule like I'm not allowed to do that before marriage.

For Rosie, a greater emphasis was placed on whether sexual encounters were harmful or not, rather than whether they occurred within or outside marriage. From Rosie's perspective, sex within marriage could be just as harmful as sex outside of it. Likewise, some participants were happy to have sex outside of marriage, so long as it was characterized by mutual consent and intimacy (for more detail, see Page & Yip, 2012; Yip et al., 2011; Yip & Page, 2013). Isha, a Hindu woman, for example, thought that the expectation to stay a virgin until marriage was an unrealistic one, despite it being an entrenched expectation from her religious community and family:

> [My religious community and parents] will definitely tell me that you're a virgin until you get married. Obviously in the modern age that really doesn't happen at all and you never have a situation or you rarely have a situation where that is the case.

Taking all the three understandings together, we can see that the participants generally drew from the creation discourse and nature discourse to rationalize and normalize their sexuality as a constituent of their God-created humanity. A heteronormative understanding pervaded these accounts, and sacredly-endorsed reasoning supported and buttressed the heterosexual imperative. For example, sexuality was considered a gift (often bestowed by God), which

should be handled with care and celebrated within the context of marriage. Not all participants agreed with this stance, however, and argued for the acceptability of sex outside of marriage on religious and ethical grounds. Meanwhile others were critical of the seemingly out-dated religious norms, indicating the impact of more secular discourses on their worldviews, particularly on the issue of sex outside of marriage (for more details, see Yip & Page, 2013). In the next section, we shall consider the participants' views on the sources from which they drew to construct their sexual values and attitudes.

Significant Sources of Influence for the Construction of Sexual Values and Attitudes

In the questionnaire, we asked the participants to rank, from a stipulated list, the factors that they considered as influential to the construction of their sexual values and attitudes. This list also contains an *Other* response category so that participants could include factors not presented in the list. The analysis of the entire sample, and cross-tabulation by gender and religious identification, consistently revealed that four key factors were most frequently ranked as the *most significant*. They were: religious faith, parents/caregivers, religious texts, and friends. Lagging far behind were factors such as siblings, printed/online media, and religious leaders. Table 1 shows the analysis for the entire sample, and by gender.

Across religious identifications, the significance given to these four factors varied slightly. Religious faith was considered the most significant by Muslim and Christian participants (respectively 74.6% [*n* = 71] and 50.6% [*n* = 237]). On the other hand, Hindu, mixed-faith, and Buddhist participants were more likely to consider parents/caregivers as the most significant factor (respectively 50.0% [*n* = 28], 41.7% [*n* = 12], and 36.4% [*n* = 11]). To Sikh participants, religious faith and parents/caregivers were equally the most significant (23.5% [*n* = 17]); while for Jewish participants, it was parents/caregivers and friends equally (33.3% [*n* = 24]).

TABLE 1 *The most significant factor influencing participants' sexual values and attitudes*

Factor	Women *n* = 289	Men *n* = 111	All *N* = 400
1. Religious faith	148 (51.2%)	46 (41.4%)	194 (48.5%)
2. Parents/Caregivers	46 (16.0%)	20 (18.0%)	66 (16.5%)
3. Religious texts	31 (10.7%)	24 (21.7%)	55 (13.8%)
4. Friends	37 (12.8%)	9 (8.1%)	46 (11.5%)

The above quantitative data shows that, regardless of gender and religious identification, there were broadly two primary sources from which the participants drew to construct their sexual values and attitudes. One of these is explicitly religious in nature (i.e. religious faith and religious texts), and the other, social (i.e. parents/caregivers and friends). Inevitably, there was intersection between these two types of sources. For example, through primary and secondary socialization, parents/caregivers and friends could serve as active agents for transmitting and reinforcing religious values pertaining to sexuality. However, it is important not to construct the participants as passive agents in this process. Often, they contested and negotiated sexual values when they engaged with various structural constraints in living out their sexuality, drawing from competing religious and secular narratives. We shall elaborate on this in the following two themes.

Negotiating Heteronormative Spaces and Values on Marriage

The qualitative data in particular demonstrate that participants inhabited overwhelmingly heteronormative spaces in their everyday lives. The two main, and inter-related, spaces where such a heterosexual assumption was paramount are the religious community (e.g. the place of worship), and family and kin networks. These spaces (with their heteronormative values, language, and implicit expectations) set a crucial backdrop to the participants' negotiation and cultivation of heterosexual identities, reinforced through the enactment of marriage as a social and religious rite of passage.

As we have already explained, heteronormativity privileges a heterosexual ordering of life and way of living. Our data shows that religious communities were pivotal sites where heterosexuality was normalized and institutionalized. Clare, a Christian university student, narrated this in the interview:

> [M]y church at home, quite a few people I know are of the mentality that you can find your identity by having a boyfriend or husband. And when I went home at Christmas one of the older women in the church who… likes to think she's a parent [to me]; every time she sees me she asks me if I've found a man yet, and she just talks about it as if that would be the only pursuit worth having whilst you are at university.

Jenny, a Christian woman, also discussed the privileging of heterosexual marriage within her religious networks:

> With the CU [Christian Union], there is very much a big focus on getting married…One of my best friends from school did her second year

[in university], had a year out to plan her marriage and now she is married as well…But no, I didn't really like that whole stance on young marriage. It seemed silly; it is all very [much] rushing into things.

Both Jenny and Clare were critical of the emphasis on marriage in religious communities. Their accounts show that the expectation to perform heterosexuality through marriage was circulated prominently in the everyday contexts they inhabited. In some participants' views, this expectation could become a pressure imposed prematurely on religious young adults. Fergus, a Christian-Buddhist man, discussed this in the interview, in the context of a Christian youth group he had participated in:

[Group members were] sort of very desperate to find someone to be with…[It cultivated] a sort of very highly charged atmosphere of a lot of young people together with a lot of emotion that naturally included some sexual energy…One of the people from that [group] is now married who is my age and that is quite shocking really to me.

Meanwhile, Isma, a Muslim woman, also experienced the pressure of the expectation to get married within her religious community and from her family:

It has left me sleepless on quite a lot of occasions. When you get [to] your 20s and your parents are like, "Ooh, do you think about getting married?" We have had loads of weddings on our street and neighborhood, girls a similar age of mine, post-university after graduation, they get married and settle down.

There is a distinctive gender dimension in the heteronormative norm of marriage: that it was even more urgent for young women, compared to young men, to contemplate marriage at a particular point in the life course (for more details see Page & Yip, 2012; Yip & Page, 2013). For some participants, this urgency was evident in intersecting social webs of religious spaces, family and kin networks, and friendship circles. The following interview quotes indicate the incessant marriage talk within the participants' diverse social networks:

It is a running joke that every time we meet [with Muslim friends] the topic of marriage always comes up, no matter how, even if you try and avoid it…You would think 10 years of knowing each other you would exhaust the topic, but you really haven't.

JASMINA, Muslim woman

> [It's] probably [my parents'] biggest wish…My dad…you know to get his
> daughter married off and that she is happy.
>
> PARMINDER, Sikh woman

Although this narration was explicitly about marriage, it also carries an
implicit yet powerful norm: the performance of heterosexuality through the
enactment of marriage, which is assumed to lead to the procreation of chil-
dren. If sex was something to be contained within marriage, there was an even
greater pressure for children to only be born within marriage. New demands
were envisioned in future marriage as participants discussed how soon they
would have children. Adala discussed the rumors that would circulate if a mar-
ried couple did not have a baby within a reasonable amount of time after their
wedding:

> There was a girl that got married…And I remember my mother and my
> auntie saying "That girl's been married 7 years and no children!"…And there
> were so many rumors going around the community saying she can't have
> children and you know, her father had cursed her…because she'd married a
> man that her family weren't happy about…So I think hitting the age of 30 if
> you don't have a child, a lot of people will say, "They've been cursed by their
> parents or by somebody." So I think, yeah, there is that taboo.

The widely-circulated discourse of marriage is conflated with the discourse of
sexuality, so that they collectively buttress the ideological foundation of het-
erosexuality. Marriage, through the wedding ceremony and the presumed
subsequent production of offspring, socially and politically legitimizes het-
erosexuality (Ingraham, 1999, 2005; Rahman & Jackson, 2010).

The gendered dimension of the expectation of marriage, and implicitly the
performance of heterosexuality, also generated a specific ideal for some male
participants: that they ought to be able to provide for their families. Vishaal, a
Hindu man, recalled in the interview that his parents had encouraged a strong
work ethic in him in order to effectively perform the role of a husband and
father, the religiously-sanctioned identity marker of a successful and produc-
tive heterosexual man:

> [My mother] turned around to me and she goes, "Don't get married if you
> haven't got a job and you can't look after a family. There's no point ruining
> someone else's life because you've ruined your own." And she [had] said
> that to me about five times now, I think…So in that sense there was always
> pressure, like I'll end up lonely if I don't make it.

Vishaal's quote reflects a specific aspect of the performance of male heterosexuality: the responsibility to provide for his own family. The successful execution of the gendered provider role is intertwined with a successful marriage and implicitly the successful performance of heterosexuality on Vishaal's part. This highlights, as we have argued, that heterosexuality is more than just sex. It is in fact about a set of social norms and relations that cultivate particular patterns of social behavior and ties (parenthood, domestic roles, paid work), mediated through familial and religious discourses.

Marriage: Rationale and Experiences

At the time of research, many of our participants were in education of some kind. Thus, their current priority was gaining qualifications. For the vast majority of our sample, marriage was delayed, and only a small minority of the heterosexual sample (21; 4.1%) was married at the time of research. Nonetheless, given the primacy of marriage in the participants' understandings of their sexuality, we want to explore this religious and cultural practice in greater depth, especially their rationale for marriage, and their experiences of being married as religious young adults.

Three of the married participants, all Christian, were interviewed. Although few in number, we decide to present these narratives because they are nuanced and detailed, illustrating the significant moments and experiences in the participants' life journeys.

These participants entered into marriage for diverse reasons; interestingly, the promise of a legitimate context for sexual activity did not emerge as a motivating factor for most of them. Their stories are presented in order to both understand the reasons for marriage and to show how married life was lived out, namely, how they managed the joys and pains of marriage.

Rationale for marriage.   The three participants gave varied reasons for getting married. Mark, who was in his first year of marriage, had very strong views about the appropriateness of sex being located only within marriage. He had experienced great tensions in his early adult life, with sexuality being connected with temptation and ungodliness, particularly in terms of masturbation and pornography, with which he engaged throughout his teenage years:

> [When] I had suddenly decided to start following God, the devil started working harder to tempt me away...I tried to battle with it more...I decided I wanted to do something about it, and turn that side of my life around. I couldn't be following God if I had an inherent sin that I wasn't repentant or dealing with.

Mark had had girlfriends but had adhered strictly to certain moral codes that legitimize sexual activity only within marriage. On meeting his current wife, however, and as the relationship developed, he fell short of his ideal:

> We had sex before we got married. I had never had sex with anyone else before, and that was part of the thing where we did lots of things during our courtship that we didn't really ought to have done...I came away from that little period saying, "Ok that was bad, that was really bad," because that is something I have tried to keep pure for so long.

Mark's uncompromising views on the appropriate context for sexual activity exclusively within marriage left him with feelings of guilt and shame. In order to rectify this, Mark and his future wife mutually agreed to have a period of abstinence in the lead-up to the wedding:

> [T]hat really helped us to concret[ize] our faiths individually, but also that we are getting married for the right reasons, building a marriage on sex would be stupid...[W]e were blessed I think by God in that 6 month period before we got married, Him teaching us that if we wanted to and if we accepted help we can be clean. And then he blessed us with marriage.

Mark offered a fascinating account on the boundary-marking and management of his sexuality and the linkage between the appropriate context for sex and purity. In his mind, cleanliness and purity were associated significantly with the context of sex within marriage. This was why it was imperative for Mark to have that period of abstinence. One interpretation of Mark's early marriage would be that he was impatient for there to be a legitimate outlet for his sexual expression. His sentiment that God blessed him with marriage can be read as a coping mechanism, for someone who found it extremely challenging to manage his sexual desires. This fits in with the classic link often made between Christians getting married to avoid sexual temptations (e.g. Cavendish, 2003). However, there is more going on here. Mark resisted the idea that he was building his marriage on sex, instead arguing that by removing sex from the equation, he was able to prove that there was more to this relationship than sexual desire. In fact, Mark's story can perhaps be alternatively read in terms of respectability and a need to be seen as respectable, not only to himself but also to his wife and to God. It was through the process of abstinence that he was also able to cultivate his faith and to have a working relationship with God. Thus, sexual abstinence was also a form of spiritual discipline (e.g. Gardner,

2011; White, 2012; Williams, 2011). In this way, marriage was used as a resource to uphold his strict religious beliefs. As we have discussed in the first theme, participants from monotheistic traditions often prioritized God as a central component in conceptualizing good and appropriate sexuality. Although the equation between respectability and marriage was once a strong feature within British life, this connection has waned since the 1960s (Roseneil, 2006; Weeks, 2007), but with God in the frame, visible respectability (through marriage) became a key means through which Mark's values could be endorsed.

Heather's relationship trajectory was rather different. Although a regular churchgoer during childhood and early adolescence, she had stopped attending after moving away from home at age 16. She found it difficult to connect with a new religious community: Her boyfriend was not a churchgoer, and she knew very few people in her new geographical location. Still retaining a spiritual or religious connection, Heather felt isolated, but she tried to re-engage with her spirituality through internet chat rooms. At 17, she had a baby, but the relationship with her boyfriend fizzled out. She later moved back to the hometown and rekindled her churchgoing in the congregation where she had been raised. In the meantime, she met another man whom she later married in her home church. Her views about sex were very different than Mark's:

> I am not persuaded by the whole leave-sex-until-marriage thing...I don't think you can properly know a person until you have experienced that intimacy with them. I think it is a bit short-sighted sometimes for a religious person to say you shouldn't do it until you get married because you could get into bed on your marriage night and find you don't like each other at all.

To Heather, sexual activity was accepted as part and parcel of intimacy cultivation in a long-term relationship. Thus, she was resistant to the sex-within-marriage-only norm. She also had a more liberal approach to faith. For example, she considered the Bible as "symbolic for me." Her liberal attitude to sex and religious faith was well-supported within her religious community:

> If people are having sex with a boyfriend even in the teenage years I think they should be supported. Not encouraged but supported and talked to openly about the different issues, having a relationship and pregnancy and all that [sort of] thing. I think my church has always been like that actually. It has not been that you can't do this so you can't come here if you do it.

On why she wanted to get married, Heather explained, "[My partner] was there for me and [daughter], which I felt happy about." Heather sought security and stability in the context of single motherhood. This was not about justifying sexual expression. Instead, Heather's focus was in cultivating available resources in supporting her daughter, as she explained:

> I took her to Church quite a lot when she was growing up, in the past few years…I am glad that my mum and dad took me, so I will do the same thing for her. I know that she will live with Christian values and morals. I have always brought her up to be kind and not to lie and not to steal.

Having been a single mother for a number of years, Heather wanted to inculcate her daughter with Christian values. Moving back to the safety and familiarity of her home town and church gave her an appropriate platform for doing this, through the love and security she experienced through a broader network of community and friends. It was in this context that the relationship with her husband flourished. As a single mother, Heather already had to work harder at respectability in her faith community. This respectability was cultivated through her daughter and her orientation towards core Christian values. Getting married in her family church was an affirmation of her status as a good Christian woman. Her marriage was celebrated in this context. Despite her religious community being accepting and tolerant of single parenthood and sex outside of marriage, being married was still seen as the preferable state. Indeed, broader secular discourses continue to situate single motherhood problematically (McRobbie, 2009; Tyler, 2011), so Heather was carving out a space within her church where she could embody respectability. Heterosexuality contains its own internal divides, with the married relationship upheld as the ideal. As VanEvery (1996, p. 40) argued, marriage acts as the "hegemonic form of heterosexuality." In getting married, Heather affirmed her status and endorsed the hegemonic ideal.

The congregational context was crucial in understanding Heather's story and what it offered her in terms of social respectability. This dimension was also pivotal in understanding Lucy's rationale for getting married. Ardently positioning herself as a liberal Christian, Lucy strongly opposed evangelical approaches to Christianity, and she had found a mutually-affirming space at a "very liberal" church. It was this faith context which facilitated the development of the relationship with her husband:

> We met at this church that I'm going to. So I think faith [was] big, especially initially in us sort of getting together…[T]here's this big group of young

people, we did a lot of things together…Church was the context. And we kind of, Dave, my husband and I we've led worship; we've led youth groups together.

The church context facilitated the development of this relationship, as activities were undertaken together, and her social life was cemented through friendship with other church couples. Values around sexual practice were extremely tolerant and liberal. Lucy had no qualms about having sex outside of marriage, and she herself had engaged in this. This stance was normalized by friends at her church, with just a few exceptions:

I think we all knew within the groups [that some have had sex before marriage]…there are people within our friendship group that don't believe in sex before marriage and that's fine I think. They would be in the minority.

But other expectations did emerge, with Lucy outlining that:

[T]here's definitely a drive to be in a couple…[a friend] is celibate and I think there's a certain kind of joke about getting him married or is he gay; and I think those kinds of conversations happen as a way of coping with the fact that he's chosen to be celibate and that's actually a bit uncomfortable for us so let's joke about marrying him off.

Lucy's church was indisputably a heteronormative space, where coupledom was strongly endorsed. As Jackson and Scott (2004) argued, heteronormativity is cultivated through everyday mundane activities, such as couples socializing together or utilizing language that endorses normative couple-based relationships (e.g. "my other half"). In this way, there is a strong imperative to be part of a couple; singlehood is deemed problematic or at least out of synch with dominant norms (Aune, 2008; Taylor, 2008). However, despite sex before marriage being seemingly acceptable in Lucy's church, there was a propensity for friends to marry quite quickly, as she narrated in her video diary:

[A] friend of ours who is part of our friendship group at Church has just recently lamented the fact that so many of us in the group are married… He went off on a big rant about how too many people are getting married young in the group, and it means we don't do anything as a group anymore. …I find that really interesting, that even in a really liberal Church, a lot of us have got married young…I guess a criticism levelled at young

Evangelicals getting married is that they do it for the sex...The fact that we are very liberal and we are still doing it, what does that mean?

In the broader context of Lucy's life, there were other factors which made marriage the encouraged option. Her parents had married young; marriage therefore had a proven trajectory. As we previously indicated, participants tended to source their values about sexuality from both religious and relational contexts. In Lucy's case, both of these spaces were very affirmative of marriage, even though unmarried relationships were tolerated. In effect, similar to Heather's experience, a heterosexual hierarchy was being invoked (Jackson, 2006). Marriage was still seen as the best relationship state. As Skeggs (1997) highlighted, respectability has a long legacy in regulating women's behavior, with respectability being "organized around a complex set of practices and representations which defined appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance; these operated as both social rules and moral codes" (1997, p. 46). Therefore, respectability (especially that achieved through marriage) is a powerful ideal to which individuals aspire.

Living out married life.   As we articulated above, respectability was a strong theme underpinning the rationale for marriage. The actual living out of married life also created its own challenges and celebrations.

Mark saw marriage as a "pure" space in which sexual activity could materialize. He had strong views that the only appropriate context for sex was marriage, and even though he had had sex with his fiancée prior to their wedding, he viewed this in sinful terms. Once married, Mark had to readjust his approach to sex, now that sex was fully permissible:

Now we are at this point where we're really learning how to relate to each other as sexual beings, as man and wife, and learning the giving nature of sex in the context of the Bible and the Christian relationship. That is quite difficult on a number of levels...being married and [sex] being a duty. So that has taken her a lot of effort to compute as well as me, and then on my side of it, I have had the whole thing of being basically trying to get rid of years and years and years of masturbation practice...So me learning how to have sex with another person and how to give and share in that properly and experience each other.

The movement of sex from the status of impermissibility to permissibility resulted in a gravitational shift in Mark's orientation to sexual expression. The value system he constructed around sex had to change; feelings of guilt had to be eradicated. As Imtoual and Hussein (2009, p. 38) put it, there is a seismic

shift for sexual activity to be "switched on" in marriage, putting enormous pressure on individuals to successfully move from one state to another (see also Avishai, 2012). For Mark, this was achieved through utilizing the Bible as a source of advice, in articulating the place of sex within a married Christian relationship. Mark was conscious, however, of what was still forbidden (masturbatory pornography), something he had struggled to contain over the last decade. Indeed, this issue cultivated an early crisis in his marriage:

> The first couple of weeks were fine because everything was new. I looked at porn once after about three and a half weeks and we had the biggest row in our marriage…I got kicked out of the house, which was good. And at the point I realized what pain I must cause God because of the pain it must have caused my wife…And then trying to work through how we could repair the damage and move on.

Mark sought to remove masturbatory pornography from his life because of the absolute sacred status he accorded relational sex (Yip & Page, 2013). This critical period, so very early in his married life, acted as a significant prompt for remedial action. Mark's orientation to sex within marriage was in cultivating strong communicative relationships between God, himself, and his wife. He was quite clear that God was a crucial component of their relationship, and the strategy he devised to create a foundationally strong marriage had God at its core:

> At the beginning of our marriage we did read the Bible and pray together every day, we had a lot of time then which was good. One of the reason we had the time is that we wanted to lay the foundation…We do have conversations about spiritual or theological things, and that is good for growth as well.

Prayer, Bible reading, and theological discussion were seen as crucial sites for the cultivation of a Christian marriage, and although participation in these activities waxed and waned, Mark was clear that such engagement could only strengthen his marriage and alleviate the turbulent start it had had.

Despite having a rather different understanding of marriage, Heather, too, had encountered problems in her married life, to the extent that the relationship had broken down by the time we interviewed her. This generated a crisis in her faith life, because she could not envisage a space for herself in her worshipping community, as a newly single individual. As previously discussed, Heather's marriage was integral to her worshipping community, symbolizing

the pinnacle of heterosexual acceptance in her liberal church. The cultivation of friendships with the religious community was fostered through her marriage and was the cornerstone of her social life. Therefore, because of the strong association between her married relationship and her support networks, the failure of her marriage led to a rupture in her faith life, as she explained:

> I have been back to church but I don't think anyone knows what to say to me. It is kind of awkward…I still read the Bible and pray, and I do want to go back to church. I still feel a little bit awkward about everything. My daughter she goes to a Church of England school, and they are very much religious and they do prayers and everything. And she goes to church. Sometimes she stays at my mum and dad's and they go to church every Sunday, so they go together which is good because I feel I am letting her down by not taking her because I don't feel able to.

The narrative above shows that the demise of her marriage undermined Heather's enactment of heterosexuality, especially within her faith community. Members of her religious community had to recalibrate their approach to Heather as a single mother. She had lost her status as enacting a hegemonic form of heterosexuality (VanEvery, 1996) and was therefore demoted to second-best forms of heterosexual representation. Aune argued that single women are much less likely to attend church because of singlehood's "non-normative status" (2008, p. 60).

As discussed in the previous section, Lucy had been having sex prior to marriage. Although she had not had any major relationship crises such as those experienced by Mark and Heather, she did discuss her newly married status in relation to the expectations of procreation, emanating from those within her Christian community, and those outside of it. She narrated this in her video diary:

> [O]ne of the Anglican prefaces to the marriage service books [highlights that] marriage [is] the place to have children…I think after we got married, people waited a few months and were then like, and we were like that as well actually. We do want children and no time is convenient, so shall we? Shall we just do it? And yeah, in the end we felt no. We got married because we want to be together and be a couple and spend our lives together, but our marriage is important and the two of us is important… It is just making me think about people at my husband's work; it is a very secular office. People are not religious…they are choosing to live together

and get mortgages first…And really it is when they talk about having chil-
dren that they seem to be thinking about getting married.

Lucy pertinently highlighted a contemporary concern for both religious com-
munities and non-religious ones: the purpose of marriage. She experienced
pressure from both religious and secular contexts that marriage should lead to
procreation. She had to reinstate the importance and primacy of the couple, in
order to dismiss any expectations placed on her to have children imminently.
The role of marriage being the location for procreation has a very long history
in Christianity (Cavendish, 2003; DeRogatis, 2003). Indeed, as Llewellyn (2013)
has argued, Christianity continues to generate pro-natalist discourses, and
those who choose not to have a child within marriage can experience oppro-
brium. But expectations are not limited to the Christian community alone;
indeed, the pressure to have children permeates broader heteronormative
expectations (Gatrell, 2008; Letherby, 1994). Marriage was perceived by those
around Lucy as the natural and most appropriate location for children to be
born, and as part of a married couple, expectations were placed on her to fulfil
this heteronormative demand.

   Only a small number of married individuals were interviewed for this proj-
ect, so their voices may prove atypical. But their stories highlight the diversity
and multi-layered reasoning underpinning marriage for these Christian par-
ticipants, and sexual activity was only part of the rationale. There were some
common features across these stories. Being married denotes compliance to
the most acceptable form of Christian relationship; a benefit accrued even for
those in the most liberal of Christian spaces. Indeed, even for individuals who
are not religious, there is a certain degree of respectability and status bound up
with being married.

Discussion

Heterosexuality often goes unnoticed, and is silent and silenced in many stud-
ies of religion and sexuality, despite being an implicit yet powerful reference
point. This article has paid critical attention to certain aspects of heterosexual-
ity and the ways it informs the lives of religious heterosexual young adults.
There has always been recognition that the institutionalized nature of hetero-
sexuality has an impact on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans individuals, being
constructed as the Other in a heteronormative culture. However, few studies
have interrogated the part heterosexuality plays in underpinning the lives of
religious heterosexuals themselves. Whilst heterosexuality is increasingly

problematized and contested in sexuality research (e.g. Ingraham, 1994, 2005; Johnson, 2005), our intention here is to examine religious young adults' negotiation of heterosexuality. This paper has mapped the ways in which values towards sex and marriage are consolidated through two primary contexts for heterosexual religious young adults: the religious and the relational. Despite diversity in religious identification, a high number of participants were significantly informed by heteronormative imperatives that facilitated the prioritization of heterosexuality in their everyday lives. Some of the meanings the participants gave to sexuality were very much aligned with heteronormative principles that can be found and located outside of religious spheres (e.g. the way in which heterosexuality itself was unquestioned and was taken as an assumed mode of being and praxis: Hockey et al., 2007; Jackson, 2006). Some participants also made a reference to the "naturalness" of heterosexuality but not so much with reference to populist scientific understandings; rather, for those in monotheistic traditions, God was utilized as naturalizing heterosexual sex. Therefore, religious young adults draw upon meanings salient in more secular contexts, but they are also impacted upon by specific religious discourses on heterosexuality. Sometimes religious discourses are not too dissimilar to secular values. For example, marriage remains the ethically most legitimate space in which to have children. At other times, religion is utilized to endorse heterosexuality, which intensifies heteronormativity. This is achieved through invoking the sacred. When God underscores the rationalization for a belief or practice, it takes on an epistemological and ontological dimension that is often very hard to challenge.

Heteronormativity was also demonstrated through specific practices. The participants narrated the substantial investment of time and effort on the telling and re-telling of heterosexuality in diverse social and relational contexts, where heterosexuality was operationalized loudly, making its presence known. Religious heterosexuals absorbed the expectations placed on them, to prioritize getting married and to envisage having children, but did not uncritically accept these expectations. Some questioned such prioritization, and youth itself was utilized as a basis for resistance.

The participants also had to navigate the place of sex outside marriage. Whereas few non-religious young adults in Britain put much purchase on waiting until marriage to have sex (McAndrew, 2010; Taylor, 2008), religious affiliation has an impact on attitudes (Yip & Page, 2013). This is one area where religious and secular heteronormative expectations are somewhat out of synch, with some participants strongly endorsing a sex-within-marriage position (even if this was, in practice, difficult to live up to). Furthermore, not all of our participants followed any religious injunctions to locate sex within marriage

only, and some had found progressive religious spaces where pre-marital sex was condoned. But even here, heteronormativity remained embedded, endorsed through a privileging of opposite-sex coupledom. Indeed, in some cases, sexual activity within a committed unmarried relationship was preferred over celibate singleness. And even those who had found such "'sacred endorsement" still lacked confidence in the status of this type of sex, vis-à-vis hegemonized sex within marriage. Meanwhile, our specific focus on married participants highlighted what marriage offered these young adults and how heteronormativity impacted on everyday decision-making. The reasons for entering into marriage were diverse, but a key factor underpinning the in-depth stories we collected is respectability (Skeggs, 1997). For various reasons, marriage augmented an individual's (especially a woman's) respectability in religious and relational contexts, whether that is before God, fellow religious adherents, friends, or family and kin networks. For some, the respectability that marriage conferred was about status and community integration. For others, it was about legitimizing sex and moving from a position of guilt to sacred acceptance. What is illuminating, however, is the question about the purpose of marriage that permeates both religious and secular contexts. Sex may no longer be the rationale for marriage amongst non-religious young adults (Weeks, 2007). Indeed, as the data presented here have shown, this is not necessarily the prerogative of religious young adults either (Freitas, 2008). Whether religious or not, young adults seem to agree that it is in marriage that procreation is sought and valued, and there are expectations on newly married couples to reproduce. Marriage remains the perceived ideal location to raise children.

We would argue that, in some ways, religious young adults are navigating heterosexuality in a similar way to non-religious young adults. However, there are also striking differences. For religious young adults, their negotiation is interwoven with religious expectations and norms, which add an alternative dimension to their experiences. Sometimes sacred authority endorses secular norms (e.g. the inextricable link between marriage and childbearing). At other times, sacred heteronormative expectations (e.g. saving sex until marriage) render religious young adults' negotiation navigation more complex and potentially conflictual.

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