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On Halal Love: Islam, Romance, and Transition to Adulthood in Urban Indonesia

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Abstract: A socio-demographic framework for understanding how global religious revivalism influences transition to adulthood in the Majority World remains limited. In post-*Reformasi* Indonesia (1998-present), the growing visibility of halal-centred narratives among Muslim middle-class young adults provides a compelling case for examining the intersection of deepening Islamic piety and intimate relationships. This study offers a socio-demographic perspective on halal love, examining how rising Islamic piety shapes young adults' romantic relationships and family formation in Malang, Indonesia. We draw on an interdisciplinary literature review to propose a series of theoretical propositions on halal love, and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews conducted in 2019 with 28 young adults. We found that halal love appeals to young Muslims navigating diverse ideals and pathways to marriage. Religiosity – not just religion – has emerged as a key social identity marker, alongside class, family background, ethnicity, and geography. It shapes how participants engage with online and offline dating and marriage markets. Halal love narratives align with broader trends in publicly expressed Islamic piety, intersecting with aspirations for self-improvement, autonomy, consumption, and social mobility. The appeal of halal love does not necessarily lead to early marriage or a rejection of small-family norms. Rather, our participants shared hybridised ideals that combined pious ways of living with small-family aspirations. We argue that halal-love narratives are linked to increasingly protracted and precarious transitions to adulthood. These findings offer broader insights into how religious revivalism shapes youth identities and demographic trends in the Muslim world and beyond.

Keywords: Marriage · Transition to adulthood · Indonesia · Qualitative · Demography of religion · Developmental idealism · Desecularisation

1 Introduction

While the global revival of religion is well-documented in the literature (see *Turner* 2010), the ways in which young adults traverse the everyday dimensions of desecularisation in the Majority World remain relatively under-theorised in

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population studies (*Dommaraju/Tan* 2024; *Jung/Park* 2020). With over 87 percent of its 276.5 million people counted as Muslims (*Satu Data Kementerian Agama RI*. 2022), Indonesia makes a compelling case to study the interrelationship between Islamic revival and transition to adulthood. Globally, faced with progressively uncertain and hypercompetitive job markets, educated young adults are delaying or sidestepping marriage (*Choi/Qian* 2023; *Cooper/Pugh* 2020; *Mills/Blossfeld* 2003). However, in Indonesia, recent studies indicate that marriage and having children continue to be largely popular ideals, with young adults showing a tendency toward earlier unions (*Dommaraju/Tan* 2024). This change has been speculatively associated with deepening Islamic piety among the country's educated youth in recent decades (*Dommaraju/Tan* 2024; *Hull/Hartanto* 2018; *Smith-Hefner* 2019).

A large body of literature has documented the rising influence of Islam in the public and private lives of ordinary Indonesians in the decades following *Reformasi*: a period of democratisation after the fall of President Suharto and his authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 (*Afrianty* 2020; *Fealy/White* 2008; *Rinaldo* 2013; *Sakai/Fauzia* 2014). Within this extensive scholarship, a growing number of scholars have examined how the so-called *conservative turn* has shaped how young adults engage in romantic relationships (*Akmaliah* 2024; *Asyari/Abid* 2016; *Madya* 2017; *Nilan* 2008; *Nisa* 2018a, 2021; *Smith-Hefner* 2005, 2006, 2018a, 2019). These studies have documented how narratives promoting ideals, representations, and practices of engaging in intimate relationships that adhere to the teachings of Islam have gained increasing visibility and, arguably, popularity among middle-class young adults in the past two decades. Promoted by diverse actors with equally diverse motivations and directions, these narratives collectively advocate for *halal* heterosexual romantic relationships, underlining the forbidden nature (*haram*) of premarital sex, discouraging (extended periods of) dating/courtship, while emphasising the importance of marriage and having children within the broader set of pious Islamic goals in transition to adulthood. In this paper, we call these narratives – and associated ideals and practices – *halal love*.

At the outset, narratives around halal love appear to challenge the prevailing small-family norms embedded in Indonesia's Family Planning Programme, which began under the New Order regime in the early 1970s (*Niehof/Lubis* 2003). Under this programme, the longstanding campaign promoting small-family norms included advocating for two-child fertility ideals. The programme also promoted gender neutrality in child preference through the slogan *dua anak cukup, laki-laki perempuan sama saja* (two children are enough, boys and girls are the same). Moreover, the Family Planning Programme pushed for later marriages and other virtues of "modern" families, including gender equality in education, which, to a large extent, resonates with the cultural model of developmental idealism (*Thornton et al.* 2012, 2015).

This paper considers how apparent currents of Islamic revivalism are shaping and shaped by romantic encounters and transition to first marriage among educated young adults in the city of Malang, East Java, Indonesia. In doing so, our paper aims to provide a socio-demographic perspective in situating how trends in halal love intersect with socio-political and demographic change in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia.

The paper has two parts. The first part presents a literature review that develops key propositions for the socio-demographic implications of halal love. The second part draws on qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with 28 young adults in Malang, conducted in 2019. The data collection and analysis are framed around three research questions: i) What constitutes halal love, and how do the young adults we interviewed interpret and ascribe meaning to it in their lives?; ii) What are the various modes of romantic encounters and intimacies associated with halal love?; iii) What factors contribute to the appeal of halal love, and how does it stand against other "trends" in romantic encounters and family formation in Indonesia?

Our findings indicate that halal love signifies neither a lack of personal autonomy nor a rejection of small-family norms. In the context of heightened uncertainties during the transition to adulthood, we propose that halal love offers a framework that provides meaning and structure to our participants. Amidst the increasingly challenging landscape of achieving job security, financial stability, and material wealth (e.g., owning a first home), Islamic principles and teachings offer direction and coherence. For our participants, narratives of halal love maintain the possibility of progressing towards marriage and starting a family – a precursor to a *good*, *modern*, and, borrowing from *Jeffrey* and *Dyson* (2022) viable life amid growing economic constraints. More importantly, given the need to navigate these economic realities pragmatically, they strategically fuse Islamic principles with longstanding ideals of *modern* family formation that resonate with the cultural framework of developmental idealism (*Thornton et al.* 2015). Consequently, we argue that halal love should not be automatically associated with *early* marriage, high fertility, or loss of agency for young men and women. By offering an alternative and *viable* path to family formation for young Muslims in Indonesia, halal love can be understood as a response to the protracted transition to adulthood amid an increasingly precarious labour market.

2 Literature review and conceptual framework

We know relatively little about how and why the growing appeal of Islam in the everyday lives of young people in Indonesia – and other parts of the Muslim World – is linked to broader socio-economic processes, and how these connections specifically drive demographic trends on marriage and family change. Several demographers have begun speculating how Islamic revival might influence marriage and fertility outcomes in Indonesia, including earlier age at first marriage (*Dommaraju/Tan* 2024; *Hull* 2012; *Hull/Hartanto* 2018). First, looking at trends in the singulate age at first marriage (SMAM), *Hull* and *Hartanto* (2018) identified a period of stagnation, or even regression, since the mid-2000s. In the early 1990s, the SMAM for women was approximately 22. By 2006, this had risen to 23.2, only to decline to 22.4 in the years 2011-2013. They further noted a subsequent rise in the SMAM for 2015. *Hull* earlier (2016) speculated that the fall in the age at first marriage was a reflection of the debates and tensions around family values and moralities between ethno-religious conservatives and progressive forces in the post-*Reformasi* era.

In a similar vein, *Dommaraju* and *Tan* (2024) view age at first marriage trends before and after *Reformasi* as "going against global trends". Using multiple data sources, they showed that a steady decrease in the probability of marriage between 1965-1990 was reversed by the early 2000s, arguing that a decline in age at first marriage can occur amidst women's rising educational attainment. From the mid-2000s, they showed how the decline in early marriage (by age 18) had slowed for women at the lower end of the education spectrum. In contrast, women with higher education experienced a rise in the probability of marriage by age 24. Drawing on data from the 2007 and 2014 Indonesian Family Life Survey series, *Ananta et al*. (2024) found that the probability of transitioning from *never married* to *married* is highest among those aged 25 to 34, with 79.6 percent of women and 59.2 percent men transitioning to marriage.

Despite these important quantitative steps in the examination of marriage-timing trends following *Reformasi*, empirical attempts to qualitatively investigate what Islamic revival would look like in practice and what this means for demographic theories on marriage and family change have been relatively scant. In the first two decades after *Reformasi*, Indonesian popular media narratives often linked the rise in Islamic piety among young people to concerns about a resurgence of early marriage – specifically child or teen marriage. What is puzzling, however, is that more recent media and government reports in Indonesia are riddled with concerns about declining marriage rates and a notable trend of aspirations to remain childfree among young people (*Wisana/Setyonaluri* 2024).

What follows is an extended literature review structured around three key strands of literature to preface our conceptual framework of halal love. First, we discuss the literature on transition to adulthood, which underscores increasingly protracted timelines amid more precarious economic and labour-market conditions. Here, we identify a gap in demographic scholarship on transition to adulthood in Asia: the re-emerging importance of religion in contemporary youth transitions in the Islamic world remains empirically and conceptually underexamined. Second, we revisit how major demographic theories – particularly the second demographic transition theory (SDT) and developmental idealism (DI) – conceptualise the (declining) role of religion in driving shifts in marriage and family formation, two key facets of transition to adulthood. In Section 2.3, we examine Indonesia's case. Drawing from interdisciplinary literature on the conservative turn in Indonesia, we question secularisation assumptions embedded in SDT and DI. Here, we outline key features in Indonesia's conservative turn and its manifestations in halal love's rising popularity. In section 2.4, we revisit and extend the conceptual framework offered by DI to understand how labour-market uncertainty interacts with religious revival, and shapes halal love as a specific mode of navigating transition to adulthood in urban Indonesia.

2.1 Islamic revival and transition to adulthood

Conceptions and patterns of transition to adulthood vary across time, space, and place. For many young people, the transition towards socio-economic independence

involves finishing school, getting a job, finding a partner, leaving the parental home, and starting a family, albeit not necessarily in that order. While the typical sequence, pathways, timing, and speed of transition to adulthood may vary from one societal context to another, young adults today are, on average, spending more time in school and entering the process of family formation at a later age than previous generations. In other words, globally, transition to adulthood has become increasingly protracted and complex (*Billari/Liefbroer* 2010; *Raymo et al.* 2015).

The influential work of *Mills* and *Blossfeld* (2003) argued that globalisation and changing labour-market structures underpin such shifts in the transition to adulthood. Drawing on data from 14 countries – mainly in Europe, as well as Canada, the US, and Mexico – *Mills* and *Blossfeld* suggest that young people face growing uncertainty due to globalisation. They argue that globalisation, marked by the internationalisation of markets, increased competition due to deregulation and liberalisation, rapid technological progress, and the rising significance of markets susceptible to shocks, has changed the way young people transition to adulthood, with uneven effects across individuals. The authors propose the "flexible partnership hypothesis", viewing cohabitation as a flexible union amid globalising uncertainties. Furthermore, their study indicates that responses vary by gender, with more pronounced differences in male-breadwinner and conservative societies. Here, men with unstable employment and low human capital tend to delay marriage and parenthood, whereas women with relatively low human capital tend to marry and have children sooner to reduce uncertainty.

In the diverse region of Asia, where cohabitation and having children outside of marriage remain largely uncommon, we are also seeing a general pattern where young people are delaying their entry into marriage and parenthood (*Yeung/Alipio* 2013). Still, there are significant variations in marriage and transition to adulthood across many countries in Asia, as well as within different segments of the population and regions in each country.

A range of factors drives the variations in transition to first marriage over time and place in Asia (*Yeung et al.* 2018). But not all of them have been given equal attention in the literature. There is a wealth of literature on how individual and household-level factors, such as sex, levels of education, urban-rural residence, and ethnicity, differentiate the patterns of transition to marriage in the region (*Jones/Gubhaju* 2009; *Tsuya* 2024; *Vikram* 2024; *Yeung/Alipio* 2013). At the generational or cohort level, studies have looked into the role of the changing nature of work, women's education, gender relations, and the hypercompetitive labour market in explaining trends in delayed marriage and non-marriage (*Dommaraju/Wong* 2023; *Gietel-Basten* 2022; *Jones/Gu* 2024; *Jones* 2005). Scholars have also documented the rising importance of online dating and other digital technologies in shaping romantic relationships and family formation patterns in Asia (*Phua/Moody* 2019; *Shen/Qian* 2024; *Yeung/Jones* 2024), as is the case in the Western world (*Potarca* 2021). However, there is limited social demographic theorisation on the role of relatively recent religious revival in shaping the contemporary transition to marriage patterns in Islamic Asia (see *Jung/Park* 2020). More importantly, in the field of demography, we know relatively little about how changing norms and uptakes of religious sentiments, narratives, and

practices coalesce with broader changes in gender relations, employment outlooks, and digital culture to shape the transition to marriage and, more broadly, the transition to adulthood in the region.

In contrast, the question of how religious revival and broader processes of socio-economic and political change interact with dating, marriage, and the transition to adulthood has attracted significant attention in other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. The ways in which Islamic revival shapes changes in courtship and family formation ideals and practices have been studied in Türkiye (*Kaya* 2015), Malaysia (*Stivens* 2013), Pakistan (*Husain* 2020), Indonesia (*Nilan* 2008; *Nilan et al.* 2011; *Smith-Hefner* 2018a), and India (*Gökarıksel et al*. 2019). This was also observed beyond Asia. For example, *Janson* examined how "young Muslim men and women in Lagos experience, imagine, and negotiate love within marital relationships, and how their conceptions have changed now that marital love has become imbued with new meanings in the context of neoliberal reforms and religious revivalism" (*Janson* 2019: 242). Through ethnographic work in Cairo, *Pettit* (2019) showed how in a labour market marked by youth unemployment and underemployment, the global industry of self-help, Hollywood movies, and religious Islamic narratives offered *cruel hope* for young people. *Pettit* (2019: 723) argued how, following the 2011 uprising in Egypt, young people turned their focus to "the individual pursuit of a career, love-marriage, and religious commitment" in the face of increasingly prolonged cycles of precarious employment. These interdisciplinary insights on transition to adulthood set the stage for revisiting assumptions about secularisation in demographic theories.

2.2 Revisiting the secularisation thesis in demographic theories

Much of the existing theorisation on the contemporary role of religion in the transition to marriage, and in family change and fertility decline, in demography, was based on the secularisation thesis (*Lesthaeghe* 2010). For example, under the second demographic transition theory (SDT), secularisation and the rise of individualism were proposed as key elements in the ideational change behind the shift to low fertility below replacement, along with associated changes in many features of marriage and family in the West (*Lesthaeghe* 2010). Because SDT was developed from empirical contexts of the fertility transition in Western Europe, it has been criticised for assuming a unilinear path of modernisation that may not apply universally (*Zaidi/Morgan* 2017). This assumption is often foundational in developmental theories of demographic and family change (*Zaidi/Morgan* 2017).

Though less explicit, under the developmental idealism (DI) framework, the role of religion and secularism was also deemed important in mainstreaming later marriage and small-family norms (*Thornton* 2001; *Thornton et al.* 2012, 2015). DI refers to the value and belief system emerging from modernisation theory. Its core tenets hold that modern societies and families are desirable and mutually reinforcing, whilst freedom and equality constitute fundamental human rights (*Thornton et al.* 2015). As a cultural model, the DI framework has been found useful in examining marriage and family change across different parts of the world, including in Muslim-majority

contexts like Türkiye (*Kavas/Thornton* 2013, 2019), and Iran (*Thornton et al.* 2012), as well as among Muslim populations in China (*Lai/Thornton* 2015). Through these studies, the DI framework suggests that when globalised development values enter Islamic or traditional contexts, they may not always lead to conflicts. Instead, they often result in a hybrid arrangement that combines values and practices. While conceptualisation of this hybridisation of ideas and ideals is integral to DI, there remains limited theorisation of the temporal pathways through which it occurs and of whether and how recursive processes are accounted for in the framework. Despite recognising varied outcomes across context and sub-populations, like other developmental theories, DI carries an implicit assumption of temporal linearity in its conceptualisation of how modernity unfolds. Meanwhile, across many parts of Asia and beyond, socio-political upheavals have cast doubt on long-held assumptions about the linear association between modernity and secularisation (*Casanova* 2007; *Turner* 2010; *Utomo et al.* 2018).

At this point, it is useful to note how secularisation has been broadly understood by social scientists working across disciplines. The secularisation thesis postulated that economic development and modernisation would be characterised by a decline in religious beliefs and practices and the declining power of religion (*Turner* 2019). *Casanova* (2007: 101) outlined "three different connotations" of secularisation. The first is the "decline of religious beliefs in practice in modern societies". The second relates to the historical trend towards the "privatisation of religion", often considered a "precondition to modern liberal democratic politics". The third connotation involves "differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as 'emancipation' from religious institutions and norms". These different connotations, while related, do not need to materialise simultaneously.

Contrary to the expectations set by Casanova's first connotation, there is ample evidence of rising religiosity and the increasing prominence of religious practices and identities in secular states. This trend is particularly pronounced in the Muslim world, including Türkiye and Indonesia, as well as in non-Muslim majority contexts such as India and the United States. These developments challenge the notion of secularisation as a linear process tied to modernisation. Scholars have attributed such tides of resurgence to a series of overlapping factors, including "heightened social instability, economic distress, and cultural uncertainty in the contemporary world" (*Asad* 2007: 83). These broader desecularisation trends provide critical context before we turn to the specific case of Indonesia.

2.3 Indonesia's conservative turn

2.3.1 Islam in post-Reformasi Indonesia

In Indonesia, Islamic revivalism in politics and everyday life became apparent following the end of the late President Suharto's 32 years of authoritarian rule in 1998. This marked the beginning of a period of democratisation, otherwise known as *Reformasi*. The terms *conservative turn* (*Van Bruinessen* 2013), Islamic revival, and rising piety are often used interchangeably to describe broader societal and visible

shifts in attitudes toward Islam and in the practice of Islam in the public and private lives of urban middle-class Indonesians after *Reformasi*. These can be observed through various lenses, including the emergence of conservative Islamic political parties and the mainstreaming of conservative social positions in politics (*Hadiz* 2018; *Hefner* 2019; *Van Bruinessen* 2013), the increasing share of women voluntarily wearing the hijab (*Utomo et al.* 2018), rising market demands for halal goods and services (*Rakhmani* 2019), the rising popularity of Islamic baby names (*Kuipers/Askuri* 2017), the rising popularity of Islamic cinemas (*Eliyanah* 2019), the growing Islamic self-help books and industry (*Eliyanah et al.* 2023; *Kailani* 2020), and other forms of pious consumption in popular culture (*Heryanto* 2011).

Drawing from this rich scholarship on rising piety on display by Indonesia's growing urban middle class after *Reformasi*, we note three pertinent points for our conceptual framework on halal love. The first is diversity. What rising piety or a conservative turn might look like in practice varies greatly. *Arifianto* (2020) sees the apparent rise of Islam post-*Reformasi* as being tied to the creation of a marketplace of ideas, where multiple religious elites, authorities, politicians, and entrepreneurs compete for power, money, and influence. In her work on religious influencers on Instagram, *Beta* (2020: 24) observed that "the accounts are not uniform in the way they represent a virtuous lifestyle", offering a sample of "accounts that lead towards a more conservative interpretation of Islamic practices and those with a more moderate understanding".

The second is the importance of digital connection: rising piety among the urban middle class coincided with a transformation in information and communication technology, including social media (*Dwifatma* 2023; *Nisa* 2018b, 2021; *Slama* 2017). As effectively summarised by *Beta* (2020: 21), the consensus in the literature is that "post-Suharto's Indonesia…is more visibly pious and more connected than ever."

Third is the notion of post-Islamism. Scholars have adopted Asef Bayat's notion of post-Islamism to describe a societal shift that has occurred in the three decades following *Reformasi* (*Hasan* 2012; *Sakai/Fauzia* 2014). *Bayat* (2005: 5) proposed that "Islamist movements in contemporary Muslim societies are undergoing a post-Islamist turn characterised by rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past". This shift can also be understood as a move away from the kind of political Islam aiming to achieve a total transformation in the political system to adhere to Islamic laws towards a more personal, often publicly expressed, expression of piety (*Hasan* 2012). *Hasan* (2012) uses the growing popularity of *Dhikr Akbar* to illustrate such a shift.

Dhikr Akbar is a mass gathering where attendees, dressed in white Islamic attire, synchronously recite liturgical forms of prayers to confess their faith. This ritualistic event is usually led by religious leaders and public officials in large mosques and often aired by private television channels. *Hasan* (2012) argued that *Dhikr Akbar* exemplifies a new sense of piety *(Ind: kesalehan baru*) among middle-class Muslims in Indonesia. Unlike the confrontational approach of Islamic "militants", *Dhikr Akbar* emphasises a more personal and individual expression of Muslimhood, which is often carried out collectively and publicly. In this way, it exemplifies public Islam.

The term public Islam itself refers to the new visibility of Islam in the public sphere and the ways in which Muslims use public expressions of their religion to define their identity, express piety, and negotiate modernity (*Hasan* 2009). With its non-confrontational theatrical effects, *Dhikr* is "often claimed to be the only effective way to purify Muslims' hearts, and thus the solution to the spiritual, moral, cultural, and social problems facing the country" (*Hasan* 2012: 371). On the one hand, *Dhikr Akbar* serves a political purpose. The spectacle of a large congregation symbolises the power of the Islamic *ummah* (community of believers) in a secular democracy. At the same time, it also represents facets of personal religious practice that are attuned to modern consumption and lifestyle. For the urban middle class, *Dhikr Akbar* encapsulates "the desire to demonstrate both their Muslimhood and new status as members of the (upper) urban Muslim middle class", which is then met "with the ability of the new religious intellectuals to package Islam for mass consumption" (*Hasan* 2012: 380). In *Dhikr Akbar*, the public performance of piety is tied to growing individual desires to be a good Muslim and achieve an internal sense of peace (Ind: *ketenangan*) in the midst of increasing socio-economic uncertainties and precarity.

The example of *dhikr akbar* – and the case of the urban Muslim middle class in Indonesia more broadly – serves as a counterexample to some parts of the secularisation thesis. What is important to note here is that this renewed vigour for Islamic piety does not necessarily indicate a widespread preference for implementing Shariah law. Within a population with an increasing proportion of highly educated young adults, diverse features of desecularisation can coexist with long-term changes towards modernity. This situation is not unique to Indonesia. In their work on Muslim youth in various global settings, *Bayat* and *Herrera* (2010) argue that young people respond differently to their circumstances: some are attracted to radical groups, while others are drawn to the idea of being a good Muslim. In the context of transition to adulthood, Islamic piety, thus, can be, and is considered to be, one of the markers of a "*truly modern*" social identity (*Bayat/Herrera* 2010: 20). These features of contemporary Islamic revival can also be observed in the case of halal love.

2.3.2 The rise of halal love

The word *halal* is an Arabic term commonly understood to mean "permissible according to Islamic Law" (*Nisa* 2021: 231). Many scholars attribute the growing popularity of halal love to the conservative turn following *Reformasi*. However, anthropologist *Smith-Hefner* (*Smith-Hefner* 2018a, 2019) theorised that its increasing appeal stems from broader demographic trends that predate *Reformasi*. Young Indonesians experience a protracted transition to adulthood, similar to their counterparts elsewhere. For women especially, this involves marrying later, pursuing higher education, and joining the workforce. According to *Smith-Hefner* (2018a: 335), this transition lengthens "the period of unmarried singlehood". Increased educational and work opportunities grant young women greater independence, often living away from home. Some believe this exposes them to risks such as losing

their virginity and pregnancy, triggering a moral panic among some segments of the Islamic authorities and communities.

The intersection of demographic trends and the conservative turn was key to the rise of halal love. As shown by debates on the legal minimum age at first marriage (see *Utomo* 2014) and the prohibition of pre- and extramarital sex through the new criminal code (*Butt* 2023), morality surrounding intimate relationships serves as a convenient entry point for debates and ideological battlegrounds after *Reformasi* (*Bennett/Davies* 2014). Halal love thus has a political dimension, representing one of many competing ideas in the new democratic marketplace for Islamic and other authorities vying for space, power, and influence.

Halal love encompasses various elements, holds diverse meanings, and is expressed through different practices. A common practical manifestation of halal love involves third-party matchmaking by religious leaders or teachers who introduce potential spouses. Matchmakers share pictures and bios of prospective partners in halal marriage markets. Instead of conventional dating (*Ind: pacaran*), couples undergo *ta'aruf,* a process of getting to know each other in a halal manner: always in the presence of others, without physical touch or impure thoughts, and with marriage as the goal. There are diverse manifestations of what halal love entails in practice. Upholding the importance of chastity, ideals on halal love are often gendered, and are readily represented in youth popular culture, including social media (*Baulch/Pramiyanti* 2018; *Nisa* 2021), web series (*Dwifatma* 2023), films (*Eliyanah* 2019), and self-help books (*Eliyanah et al.* 2023). *Eva Nisa* (2021) underlined how halal matchmaking and anti-dating campaigns have flourished in Indonesia and neighbouring Malaysia since the 2000s, aided by the internet and social media. She argued that the growing popularity of halal love "signifies both the strengthening of conservativism and the manifestation of the growth of contemporary Muslim publics" (*Nisa* 2021: 231). Popular preachers coined phrases such as *Jomblo Fissabilillilah* (a single (not or never married) fighter in the way of God) to frame youth and singlehood – that being single in the way of God is better than being in a non-halal romantic relationship. A collective called *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* (Indonesia without dating) targeted and recruited young people aged 15-25 through social media like Facebook and Instagram, charging a membership fee of AUD 18 for a card, book, and event discounts (*Hidayat/Khalika* 2018). Together, they reject secular notions of romantic freedom and redefine love as a journey divinely guided by religion. Through the use of catchy phrases in sermons, youth movement, and youth consumer products, they make Islamic morality more appealing and public to young Muslims (*Akmaliah* 2024). Such campaigns and collectives demonstrate organised efforts to promote and sustain halal-love narratives across networks of young Muslims.

As an alternative mode of transition to adulthood, halal love is filled with contradictions. For young adults, it appears romantic and elusive yet within reach. For those seeking to benefit from the large pool of young people, halal love is both a lucrative business opportunity and a popular entry point for broader Islamic teaching for young people. Halal love markets Islam under the banner of romance and self-improvement, highlighting the idea of *Hijrah,* an all-encompassing shift to

the good life as modern, pious, and materially and spiritually contented Muslims. According to *Rijal* (2025), Muslim youths involved in the *Hijrah* movement strive to express their piety in practical and visible symbols, including comportments in accordance with *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and adherence to the *sunna* (i.e. prophetic tradition) in their interactions, including in seeking marriage partners. Akin to discussions on emerging Islamic piety (*Bayat/Herrera* 2010; *Hasan* 2012), halal love also emphasises personal growth without radical socio-political transformation. Through promoting anti-dating sentiments, halal love is often packaged with (halal) entrepreneurial and consumerist undertones (*Rakhmani* 2019). For example, halal livelihoods through forms of self-employment became appealing in times of dwindling prospects of upward mobility-enabling formal-sector jobs for young urban Indonesians (*Rakhmani/Utomo* 2023).

2.4 Conceptual framework: Hybrid modernity, developmental idealism, and halal love

Drawing on the above interdisciplinary literature on Islam, young people, and socio-political change in Indonesia and the Muslim world, our paper sets forth the following propositions. First, we argue that halal love serves to infuse private romance with Islamic values while simultaneously romanticising public Islam. We build on the arguments proposed by *Hefner* (2001) and *Hasan* (2009) to highlight that one of the most compelling faces of public Islam in *post-Reformasi* Indonesia is romance. On the one hand, halal love establishes religious frameworks for pathways to marriage. For these young Muslims, Islam is a moral framework for expressing romance and making it visible in public. On the other hand, the relatable topics around love, romance, and marriage make halal love an appealing entry point for religious actors and entrepreneurs in marketing morality to a large number of the youthful *ummah* and consumers in Indonesia (*Rakhmani* 2019, 2024). In this way, halal love romanticises public Islam by transforming Islamic practice into an emotionally appealing and aspirational lifestyle. Rather than simply a set of rigid rules to follow, Islamic ways of being and living become personally fulfilling practices and provide social (and potentially romantic) connections. In fact, among young Indonesian Muslims love and affection have become a crucial arena for performing piety. Through this process, halal love helps make piety *trendy,* and vice versa. As such, public displays of piety become more attractive and desirable identity markers – both in the dating/marriage market and in everyday life. Hence, the growing popular appeal of halal love questions the long-held assumption on how secularisation would fuel marriage and family change in Islamic Southeast Asia, as postulated by earlier Western-based theories on marriage and transition to adulthood (*Kavas/Thornton* 2019; *Lesthaeghe* 2010; *Thornton et al.* 2015).

Second, halal love challenges the dichotomies between Islamic fundamentalism and secular/progressive ideals: each extreme tends to harbour its own prejudices, stereotypes, and moral anxieties regarding gender, sex, marriage, and family forms under the other. Extending the work of *Smith-Hefner* (*Smith-Hefner* 2018a/b, 2019), we show that the case of halal love embodies a marriage of contradictions. On the

one hand, halal love serves as a proxy of desecularisation. On the other hand, it reflects growing neoliberal aspirations for self-improvement, consumption, and upward mobility-enabling lifestyles. These dynamics take place against a backdrop of increasingly precarious labour markets that characterise young people's protracted transition to adulthood in urban Indonesia (*Rakhmani/Utomo* 2023), and elsewhere (*Matsuda et al.* 2024; *Yeung/Alipio* 2013).

To explicitly frame these propositions from a socio-demographic theoretical standpoint, we revisit and build on the aforementioned literature on developmental idealism (DI) (*Thornton et al.* 2012, 2015, 2019). The original DI framework anticipates hybridisation with local cultures rather than simply displacing them. However, the unique temporal trajectory of Indonesia's conservative turn offers an opportunity to expand DI's ideas of hybridisation, particularly in its sequencing possibilities. Unlike typical scenarios in which DI gradually shapes prevailing local cultures alongside modernisation and secularisation, Indonesia's conservative turn represents a reversal. First, indigenous family systems evolved alongside Islam, which then engaged with DI, particularly during the New Order era and its hegemonic Family Planning Programme. Following *Reformasi*, subsequent Islamic revival – at the outset – might actively reshape and/or even challenge and undo DI narratives. However, rather than creating conflict, the literature reviewed above suggests that DI and Islamic revival can potentially coexist to foster hybrid ideals regarding marriage and family formation. We propose that such coexistence and selective adaptation are likely to emerge particularly amid increasing economic uncertainty, where halal love provides meaning and structure for navigating viable romantic relationships within Islamic boundaries. This process extends DI's original hybridisation concept by demonstrating a more recursive, rather than linear, fusion of modern family formation values around the transition to marriage with seemingly conservative Islamic ideals. Taken together, in terms of broader demographic trends, our framework suggests that 1) halal love does not necessarily equate to early/teen marriage, and 2) ideals of small-family norms are, in fact, compatible with these contemporary narratives of the *Islamic* way of living.

3 Methods: Qualitative insights on halal love

The empirical portion of this paper is drawn from a bigger project on marriage pairing and social change in urban Java conducted in 2019. Using qualitative methods, our target population for the larger project was young adults with at least senior high school qualifications residing in the cities of Greater Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Malang. This paper analyses a subset of interviews from Malang, a major education hub in East Java.

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, recruiting participants through snowball methods via WhatsApp and campus flyers. An opportunistic sample of 176 potential informants was gathered. By recruiting a final-year undergraduate student as a research assistant, we managed to identify various WhatsApp groups for young adults in Malang as starting points for the snowball recruitment process.

Circulating a link to an online survey, we asked potential participants to answer a brief series of questions on marital status, age, sex, education, social media use, and whether they were attending any forms of Islamic study groups (e.g. *Kajian*). We selected and invited 28 out of 176 respondents to participate in interviews. The purposive sample of participants was, of course, not at all representative of our target population. Indeed, the main purpose of the data collection was to explore and provide a deeper understanding of the appeal, ideals, and practices surrounding halal love (see *Tenny et al.* 2023). Our goal was to ensure a diverse range of insights based on factors such as sex, education, and involvement in Islamic study groups.

The interviews were guided by the research questions of our larger project. At the time of the interviews, the mean age of participants was 21, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 35. Of the 28 participants, half were women and all were Muslims. A majority of 22 were either currently attending or had graduated from university. Six finished senior high school but had no tertiary education. Most of the participants were Javanese, and many were recent migrants who had come to Malang from other cities or provinces to study. Ten of the informants had lived in Malang for ten years or less, and of those, seven had lived in Malang for only five years or less. The majority of informants were never married, although there were some newlyweds. During the interviews, we attempted to gauge religiosity through multiple questions rather than relying solely on self-reported practices, such as prayer frequency, since all participants were likely to affirm the importance of religion in their lives. We discussed explicit indicators like participation and/or leadership in religious student groups, following Islamic preachers on social media, and other characteristics that have become subtle but significant identity markers among young Muslims. These include socio-linguistic expressions, clothing choices, and how they weave piety into their aspirations and interests.

We conducted all interviews in Bahasa Indonesia and analysed them using thematic analysis. Emerging themes were identified during and right after the interview, once again before transcripts were written in a consolidation meeting after the last interview had been conducted, and were refined following the reading of the transcripts. The transcribed interviews were coded using a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive iterative coding, guided by research questions and the literature review, while allowing emergent themes to develop from the interviews (*Swain* 2018). Four key themes emerged from the analysis, each addressing one or more of the research questions outlined above. We present our results in alignment with these themes.

4 Results: Qualitative insights on halal love

4.1 Rising appeal of halal love amidst diversity in marriage and family ideals

While some informants provided valuable insights into its appeal, these do not reflect the full spectrum of experiences within the broader sample of our larger

study. Our interviews reveal a wide range of attitudes toward romantic relationships, including dating, courtship, and marriage in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia. Although public expressions of Islamic piety have become increasingly abundant, they do not fully dominate young people's romantic landscapes. Ideals like halal love have become more visible over the past two decades, yet they coexist with the mainstreaming of diverse family practices. These include non-marriage, childfree marriages, and families formed through divorce, step-parenting, and single parenting, often normalised through social media. Indeed, social media influencers in Indonesia curate snapshots of varied family and marriage typologies. While not everyone can sell records, become a movie star, or rise to prominence as an Islamic preacher, arguably, anyone can fall in love, get married, and have a family – relatively attainable goals. In this way, curated images, ideas, and ideals of falling in love, being in love, and starting a family – whether pursued through halal pathways or otherwise – hold broad appeal for young adults. Love sells, and likewise, halal love sells.

This rising appeal of halal love is evident in settings such as the Islamic Study Group at a public university in Malang. In the Faculty of Literature at a university in Malang, the students have a special Islamic study forum where they invite different *ustad*/ preachers/religious teachers every week to speak on a given topic. The organisers have noticed that whenever the topic is about finding your soulmate, marriage, family, and romantic relationships, they were likely to have larger audiences than they would normally. A similar sentiment was expressed by one of our participants, a student who was also a rising preacher, often receiving invitations to speak in Islamic youth formal and informal forums:

> *When I'm invited to speak to young people, the requested topic is often related to love (Ind: cinta-cintaan). Many of them talk about love, but they don't truly understand what it means. Many say "I love you", but their words are often shrouded in lust (Ind: berbalut hawa nafsu). The organisers usually suggest the topic and angle for my lecture, and I adjust accordingly. I often compare discussions of love and dating with (pious) aspirations and motivations. (Surya, male, 21, never married)*

What kinds of transitions to marriage are envisioned by advocates of halal love? On the one hand, informants underline the important role of the religious teachers/ leaders, who are trusted to search, collate, and recommend potential good matches for an individual to consider. However, many of their stories indicate a high degree of agency and self-choice in the spouse selection process. One informant, Annisa, illustrates that this often involves the familiar processes of mutual attraction that did not arise from a formal Islamic matchmaking process.

> *Right now, I have someone (suitor) in mind, but we're not dating; it's more of a commitment toward marriage. We met because we are in the same (student) organisation and work together on the same committee.* (*Annisa, female, 21, never married*)

Annisa explains that her (non) relationship is halal and is different from conventional courtship. It involves mutually agreed commitment toward marriage between those who are somewhat attracted to and care about one another, but without actively dating. In such a commitment, premarital intimacy is forbidden, and public declarations and explicit signalling of being a couple are avoided. Here, another important point to underline is that halal love does not mean regression to a state where women have little agency in their transition to marriage. On the contrary, another female participant suggested that halal love movements have women's interests at heart:

> *Groups like Indonesia Without Dating (Ind: Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran) are good initiatives. It's better to just get married right away, rather than dating for a long time and not getting anything out of it.... Like wives who are just being played around with, that's just wasting time, wasting money.* (*Puspa, female, 21, never married*)

Demonstrating agency and consideration for women's rights and needs, participants who are sympathetic to halal-love narratives also reject stereotypes suggesting that strict adherence to Islam is associated with a preference for early marriage (e.g. under 18) or relatively large families. Among female participants, the ideal age at marriage they nominated for women was 22.6, and 25.4 for men. Among the male participants, the corresponding ages were 24.1 and 26.9. Zahra, a first-generation university student supported by a scholarship for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, grew up in a village outside Malang. She now lives in a rented house with four other devout Muslim girls, all of whom follow strict rules: no male friends inside the house or in the bedrooms; male guests may linger on the terrace or, if indoors, must leave doors open; and they can only stay until 10 pm. When asked about marriage timing, Zahra emphasises that for her, higher education is key to intergenerational mobility:

> *There is actually a difference when I see friends who are already married. Sometimes I wondered if it would be nice if I got married instead of going to university. But then I remember my family (parents). If I had gotten married, I wouldn't be able to pursue my dreams. But at that time, I also remember my family; I won't be able to dream of creating a better family and future, right? But if we go to university, later we can work in our field. If we would get married (early), like I see those friends, they just sit at home taking care of household matters, and that's it, they don't have [goals like] "what should I do, what should I do", there's nothing. Whereas when I look at my friends who go to university, village friends who are children of well-off people and go to university, they have a more advanced way of thinking, [like] "I should be like this, later I should be like this", it's actually directed/ goal-oriented. (Zahra, female, 21, never married)*

Among the participants, the average ideal number of children was 2.64, with 2 being the mode, and slightly higher for men (2.83) relative to women (2.36). Such fertility preferences further illustrate how the young women we interviewed exercise agency in envisioning their futures, weighing practical considerations among practical aspirations. Aya, a 21-year-old high-school graduate working as a contract factory worker, exemplified this thoughtful approach. She has two older sisters, who married at the relatively young ages of 19 and 17 and subsequently had 4 and 2 children, respectively. Unlike her older siblings, she said she would like to get married at 23 and wanted to have two children:

> *I am afraid things will be unmanageable…. I saw her cleaning up the house, and looking after four young kids, like, just seeing it gives me a headache. One had not stopped crying, then the other one started crying. Not to mention when they fight, they all cried at the same time.*

Aya's fertility ideals demonstrate how women situate their reproductive preferences with assessments of what is practical and "good" for their own circumstances. Her preference for two children reflects broader norms long campaigned for by Indonesia's Family Planning Programme and aligns with patterns observed elsewhere in urban Indonesia (*Utomo et al.* 2021).

4.2 Religiosity and social media

Across Indonesia, social identities concerning socio-economic class, family background, ethnicity, and religion are all important questions that parents would typically ask young adults about their romantic partners (*Utomo* 2020). The rising appeal of halal love, observed in our fieldwork and interviews, shows how religiosity – not just religion – has now become a key identity marker and sorter. These markers include personal attributes like clothing and symbols of religious affiliation (e.g., the length and style of hijabs, the length of pants in men, or pins showing membership in a particular Islamic study group). In both online and offline dating and marriage markets, young adults are expressing their religiosity more openly and less subtly when presenting themselves and seeking partners. These expressions not only identify someone as "Muslim" but also communicate the levels of piety and religiosity that an individual wishes to convey to others.

One informant, Imam (male, 24, married), first noticed his future wife at a restaurant, drawn to her religious pin. This pin led him to search for her online and discover which Islamic study group she regularly attended. They connected online and then sought their families' and religious leaders' approval before marrying. Another participant, Edo, is explicit about his preference for women in *niqab* (face-veil):

> *My ideal partner should be someone with a strong faith. A woman who can cover her aurat (parts of the body that should be covered) means that, Inshallah (God willing), her inner self is also well-guarded. I hope of having*

> *a wife who wears the full niqab. I have female friends who wear the niqab. The other day I saw one of them had a WhatsApp status with another niqab-wearing girl. I asked my friend: who is that girl? And then she gave me a clue. I started looking for her online…but I won't ask for her number unless I am ready. And even then, I won't ask for her number, I will ask the number of her parents instead. (Edo, male, 22, never married)*

In the above quote, Edo professes a relatively conservative, family-oriented approach to relationships, where modesty and piety are key criteria for selecting a partner. Similarly, Surya shares his experience with such interactions, explaining how he navigates these approaches and his own views on taking a respectful, measured approach to relationships.

> *I often got approached through Instagram direct messages by women: "Do you have a candidate (for marriage)? Do you want to take your relationship to the next level?" I'd say, "Sorry, but I don't have any intention of getting married right now. I still want to pursue my studies." Some said it's okay, some said they'll wait…But if I like someone, I won't talk to the girl. Instead, I will speak to her parents…. I have not done this yet, but, if I ever want to marry someone, I will first speak to her father: "Sir, I like your daughter". That is the hallmark of being a real man, not just saying "I love you". (Surya, male, 21, never married)*

Male participants like Edo and Surya articulate ideals about asking fathers directly for permission to marry their daughters to strongly signal their pious masculine identity. But actual practices often diverge from these stated ideals. The interviews suggest that in the market for halal love, women are not merely waiting passively for marriage proposals. Some actively initiate conversations, often using social media messages, to express their intentions and gauge mutual interest in pursuing marriage. Moreover, even men who espouse these seemingly conservative ideals often engage directly with women online first – as demonstrated by their accounts above – searching for and connecting with potential partners through social media before involving families. While asking fathers for permission might suggest women lack agency, this formal step typically occurs only after women have already agreed through direct communication (though perhaps implicitly). Women retain the right to refuse, and fathers generally defer to their daughters' preferences. In other words, the practice of asking fathers for permission to marry their daughter does not represent true patriarchal control over women's choices. In fact, it is culturally expected, regardless of whether the relationships follow halal principles. In conventional self-choice or love marriages, parental blessings and approval remain crucial (*Utomo et al.* 2016), and across Indonesia's many ethnic communities, men are expected to formally propose to the woman's family in events leading up to the wedding (Ind: *lamaran*). The main difference is in the speed at which this happens. Conventional courtship usually involves a lengthy period of dating before formal proposals, often lasting months or years. In contrast, halal-love narratives idealise

quicker timelines, where formal marriage discussions can occur within weeks of the initial contact.

Insights from our participants above highlight the role of social media in facilitating potential romantic encounters. What we found interesting was that fragments of halal-love ideals and aspirations are intertwined across a wide spectrum of Islamic piety. Aya, the participant cited earlier, is dating a 29-year-old man who owns a barber shop. They met on Tinder. They both agreed to delete their Tinder app after dating each other. She described him as mature and quite religious. He likes to listen to or watch Islamic teaching sessions on YouTube, and suggested she start wearing the hijab, saying "*menutup aurat itu keharusan*" (covering your *aurat* is a religious obligation).

What emerges from these accounts is how online and offline encounters work to encourage and curate certain representations of Islamic identities, and in shaping ideals and practices of halal love. Social media and digital platforms serve as key spaces where individuals navigate the search for compatible partners (*Akmaliah* 2024). An increasing blurring of boundaries between offline and online spaces in fostering and mediating intimate relationships, potentially leading to marriage, resonates with insights from other participants. While the internet broadens romantic possibilities beyond one's immediate social circles, it simultaneously reinforces established social norms, now imbued with the rising importance of markers of religiosity. This influences not only how individuals identify potential partners but also how they navigate relationships once a connection is established. The next section further outlines how social media not only facilitates encounters but also serves as key spaces where broader Islamic ideas and teachings grow in popularity among young adults.

4.3 Post-Islam: Societal shift from political Islam to more personal publicly expressed piety

The third key theme that emerged from the interviews focuses on trends in post-Islamism. This theme suggests that narratives and practices surrounding halal love reflect a wider societal shift from political Islam to more personal, yet often collective, expressions of public piety. One participant shared that he and his wife enjoyed attending the *Dhikr Akbar* together. This event, which they once attended as singles, has continued to be an important part of their lives after marriage. Following *Reformasi*, public rituals like *Dhikr Akbar*, and various Islamic study groups (Ind: *kajian*), create spaces for both collective expressions of and personal desires for piety.

Like halal love, the growing popularity of *Dhikr Akbar* is part of the broader movement known as *Hijrah*. Many participants frequently expressed that their ideals and aspirations for halal love are closely tied to the notion of *Hijrah*, which represents a comprehensive transformation for self-improvement and is gaining momentum through social media. Informants articulated their desires to become better, more pious Muslims and to achieve fulfilling lives, often contrasting this with their perception that previous generations – or specifically their parents –

had a more limited understanding of Islam. Our interviews reveal that narratives around halal love – and more broadly around *Hijrah* – highlight new possibilities for upward mobility not experienced by previous generations. These opportunities are anchored in spiritual growth (becoming better Muslims) as a central aspiration, while also encompassing material wealth, higher education, and broader social mobility. Rituals such as *Dhikr Akbar* and the proliferation of Islamic study groups and religious preachers and influencers have opened more inclusive pathways for informants, including those from non-religious traditions or families, to embrace and strengthen their connection to Islam.

The strong desire for self-improvement was often coupled with questions about whether one is yet "ready" (Ind: *siap*) for the next step towards marriage. Here, we return to our participant, Edo, who was unsure when asked whether he would get the number of the girl that he fancied after seeing her on social media.

> *I am not ready.... First, my foundation of religious knowledge is still very low. I need to improve my religious knowledge first. Second, it is due to financial reasons. If I haven't found a stable job yet, I'll just wait.... What I often do is watch lectures from various imams on YouTube and Instagram. Like, mostly Ustadz Firanda, then Ustadz Basalamah, Khalid Basalamah.... They often mention discussions about marriage. Just this morning, I heard that marriage is an act of worship. So, don't equate worship with things like wealth, or where my education stands. If the intention is for worship, then go ahead and get married right away. (Edo, male, 22, never married)*

Despite what the preachers advocated on YouTube – that one does not need to wait until they have enough material wealth to marry and start a family – Edo felt he was not ready, financially and in terms of faith. This suggests that while young people appreciate and are influenced by these teachings, they are also aware of their realities and remain reflective of their circumstances. Similar to Edo, Surya, who is popular with young women due to his role as a mosque guardian (Ind: *takmir masjid*) and young preacher, expressed that he is not ready for marriage (Ind: *belum siap*). As a result, he feels the need to suppress his desires (Ind*: menahan*) for the time being. These narratives around self-improvement and "readiness" suggest that halal love does not automatically lead to early marriage. While this was more often and clearly articulated by men in our interview samples, similar sentiments were also shared by the women in our sample. We outline this in the next section.

4.4 Halal love and the complex realities of transitioning to adulthood

The final theme expands on the earlier discussions by examining two key aspects of halal love that shape transitions to first marriages. The first is the role of third parties, such as parents (which we discussed briefly in 4.2) and religious leaders, in spouse selection. The second concerns the timing of marriage in the context of growing economic precarity. These aspects – shifts toward self-choice marriage and delayed marriage – are defining features of the transition to adulthood observed

across much of Asia (*Utomo et al*. 2016; *Yeung/Alipio* 2013; *Yeung/Jones* 2024). How, then, does halal love align with or diverge from these broader trends?

One notable feature of halal-love practices is the popularisation of *ta'aruf* – Islamic matchmaking involving religious authorities (*Nisa* 2018a, 2021). It is tempting to assume that halal love means a step "backward" in the transition to self-love marriage; that it brings arranged marriages back to the fore and reduces individual autonomy in spouse selection. However, participants challenge the idea that halal love diminishes agency for young people in choosing their own partners. Insights from our participants indicate that the distinction between self-choice and arranged marriages is not always straightforward, nor is it useful. As expressed by Budi, even love marriages often include an element of matchmaking and/or third-party approvals or endorsements, which may come from sources beyond family networks or religious leaders:

> *Arranged marriages are not just something that's done between families; there are also several other factors. For example, among friends in the same cohort in school, or because of being in the same study group at the mosque…. There's no such thing as finding a match on your own…. There is always some kind of arrangement, but it's due to factors that are often unrecognised. (Budi, male, 35, married)*

Ambivalence in terms of third-party roles in transition to marriage is commensurate with broader trends, especially when it comes to continued parental roles in guiding the process of family formation of young adults. Quotes from Annisa and Zahra provide two contrasting perspectives on the interplay between parental influence, halal-love narratives, and the consequent timing of marriage:

> *I read books about women and learned that marriage shouldn't be extravagant and that a woman must travel with a mahram* (*male guardian*). *I realised that I couldn't go to Europe for my master's unless I was with a husband. I became confused and asked my mom. I said I wanted to get married after my bachelor's, but my mom disagreed, saying I should focus on my master's first. She said, "Oh, that was in the time of the Prophet, because back then, it was dangerous for women to travel without a* mahram. *Now, it's safe." We had a bit of a debate. She said, "Finish your master's first, then get married". I said, "What? But this is Sharia, Mom". She refused to accept it…. Many of my cousins got married after their bachelor's, but my dad saw it as not wanting a better life. He insisted that I needed a master's degree. I felt it was unfair and like I was being used to fulfil their hopes. But I still want to get married, not just to control my desires but to worship and protect my natural state as a woman. I'd feel safer with a husband.* (*Annisa, female, 21, never married*)

While Annisa could not get her parents to agree to marriage, Zahra was able to say no to her parents' inquiry in the face of a marriage offer:

> *I was being (romantically) pursued by a guy and was almost arranged to marry by his family. I turned it down because I wanted to focus on my studies, not get married. He had been chasing me since high school, and his plan was for me to marry him and become a stay-at-home wife (not work) if I didn't continue my studies. Because I got accepted into university, I told him I wanted to focus on my education and pursue my dreams. I said to my parents, "If he truly loves me and is serious, he'll wait and support me in achieving my goals. But if he's not serious, he can find someone else". (Zahra, female, 22, never married)*

Zahra and Annisa's cases illustrate the varying degrees of parental influence on young people's decisions about entry into marriage. Both examples underscore that parental approval, along with either the participant's own desire or their parents' wish for their daughter to complete higher education, plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of good timing for marriage. Furthermore, these insights suggest that there are intergenerational factors to consider; we cannot generalise whether older generations are more resistant to or supportive of earlier halal relationships, often viewed as a way to avoid premarital sex. Instead, what often comes up in interviews is that halal-love narratives might facilitate earlier marriage by reducing the financial pressures associated with large wedding celebrations. The emphasis on modesty creates viable and practical pathways to marriage and family formation:

> *The bigger obstacle to getting married is the thought of the expensive wedding reception costs. But in (our) religion, the reception is not required. (Budi, male, 35, married)*

Aside from easing wedding-related financial pressures, the ways in which halal love creates accessible pathways to marriage and family formation are connected to a key phase in the transition to adulthood: the school-to-work transition. Over half of the participants were students during the interviews, with eight working as their main activity and three engaged in housework. As such, many of the participants' accounts of their anticipated labour-market experiences were future-oriented. Several key points emerged regarding school-to-work transitions and marriage expectations. First, there was a general agreement that education is crucial for upward mobility, and participants viewed Islam as aligned with this aspiration. Educational aspirations reflect prevailing trends towards gender parity in higher education completion in Indonesia (*Qibthiyyah/Utomo* 2016), with some female participants expressing a desire for postgraduate degrees and reporting that women or family members were pursuing advanced qualifications, even when their husbands had not completed master's degrees. For both men and women currently in tertiary education, completing higher education appeared to be a prerequisite for marriage.

Second, halal-love ideals appeared to lower material barriers to family formation by emphasising spiritual and moral qualities over extensive financial resources and material wealth, particularly homeownership. Homeownership was viewed as negotiable rather than essential. Participants accepted arrangements in which

newlyweds live with extended family whilst building financial stability, citing common arrangements among their married older siblings. In this way, halal-love narratives support prolonged dependence on shared material resources with parents, though intergenerational transfer of financial support and care can go both ways. In fact, under Islamic teaching, maintaining close ties with parents is expected and commended.

Third, although there were no explicit concerns about economic precarity or financial hardship among the few recently married respondents, all are in dual-earner marriages, challenging stereotyped views of Islamic male breadwinner ideals where women belong in the home. Couples with full-time jobs often engage in entrepreneurial side gigs, suggesting that additional income streams are common to meet economic needs. Interestingly, despite flexibility on gender roles when it comes to educational attainment and income contribution, there is a steadfast expectation of and for men to be the *true* head of household (see *Eliyanah et al.* 2023). There is an underlying preference for women to be secondary earners (as found in *Utomo* 2012), but women having higher education and income than their partners was acceptable as long as men kept their roles as household and spiritual leaders (Ind: *Imam*). When describing their ideal husbands, women use terms like "*cukup*" (sufficient) and "*mapan*" (financially secure), as suggested by Puspa:

> *The ideal husband is someone who can guide me, is devout in his faith, and has an income sufficient to provide for the family. (Puspa, female, 21, never married)*

These expectations reflect halal love's broader emphasis on sufficiency and modesty rather than affluence and extravagant lifestyles. Such an approach is seemingly convenient given prevailing economic realities.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Through insights from interviews with educated young people in Malang, we show that halal love - in its ideals, practices, and narratives - operates dialectically. First, consistent with the literature on Islam and young people in Indonesia, insights from our participants reveal that marriage and family serve as entry points for promoting Islamic values among young adults. With topics on love and marriage used to attract young audiences in Islamic study groups and sermons, Islamic entrepreneurs and authorities actively commodify rising religious engagement by leveraging halal love to attract young people to Islam (*Akmaliah* 2024; *Nisa* 2021). In this process, love, marriage, and family become vehicles for disseminating conservative values, which may challenge – or at times, surprisingly align – with – liberal ideals about individual rights, gender, and sexuality. However, as established in our conceptual framework, we argue that this seemingly top-down approach to disseminating halal-love ideals complements rather than conflicts with the youth-driven halal-love practices that we highlight.

Second, the interviews suggest that the growing importance of religiosity as a social identity marker in both online and offline encounters encourages new forms of assortative mating among educated young people in our sample (*Akmaliah* 2024; *Nisa* 2021; *Smith-Hefner* 2018a, 2019). The halal-love narrative owes its increased visibility – across online and offline spaces – to the previously mentioned Islamic revival or conservative turn, which goes hand in hand with consumerism (*Rakhmani* 2019). The Indonesian Muslim middle class's desire to consume products that are religiously acceptable and able to give them a sense of being good Muslims has led to not only the production and circulation of Halal-certified consumer products but also the production and distribution of discourses and practices on becoming good Muslims (*Eliyanah* 2019; *Eliyanah et al.* 2023; *Heryanto* 2011; *Kailani* 2018, 2020). Halal love – as promoted by aforementioned Islamic entrepreneurs and preachers - is among the discourses of becoming good Muslims. Through teachings in various religious study groups, peer networks, social media, and broader popular youth culture, halal love encourages our participants to pursue a form of romantic relationship that will transform them into better Muslims. However, we note that our participants are not passive consumers of halal love narratives. Instead, their adoption of these ideals reflects a nuanced negotiation between what is feasible and what remains aspirational in their quest for self-transformation (*Hijrah*).

Such dialectical negotiations between religious authorities and educated young people in our sample – some of whom have themselves become religious actors/ entrepreneurs - are embedded within broader post-Islamism dynamics. Halal love is not merely an intimate or romantic practice shaped by individual choice but is embedded within a larger spiritual, moral, and social transformation *(Hasan* 2012; *Sakai/Fauzia* 2014). This understanding echoes the conceptualisation of halal love as part of a collective religious revival that involves Islamic authorities and entrepreneurs, modern aspirations, and community belonging in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia.

Finally, insights from our interviews challenge the moral panic surrounding what the so-called conservative turn means for trends in the transition to adulthood. In the early years following *Reformasi*, concerns arose over the potential for conservative ideals to spur early marriage (*Dommaraju/Tan* 2024). However, fieldwork findings reveal a far more complex reality. On the one hand, halal love reinforces the universality of marriage and childbearing among educated youth, countering predictions of a "flight from marriage" in Southeast Asia (*Jones* 2005). On the other hand, it is not the sole or dominant ideal; halal love coexists with competing visions of romance, marriage, and family in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia's digital and democratic landscape. Moreover, the qualitative insights we gathered suggest that while halal love is framed as aligning with Islamic ideals, it accommodates individual autonomy and small-family norms, reflecting broader socio-economic conditions and values that align with developmental idealism (*Thornton et al.* 2015), rather than simply promoting early marriage. Despite romanticised Islamic ideals, educated young adults in our sample were acutely aware of the challenge of securing stable, upwardly mobile jobs – a common prerequisite for starting a family. Interestingly, delays in marriage were often justified not by financial constraints but in religious

terms, with individuals citing a lack of sufficient "religious capital" to begin family life. This framing suggests that halal love offers young people a language and coping mechanism to navigate the uncertainties of a precarious labour market, aligning with their protracted transitions to adulthood and reshaping aspirations within their economic and social realities (*Pettit* 2019; *Rakhmani/Utomo* 2023).

In summary, as an expression of deepening Islamic piety among young adults in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, halal love does not necessarily signal a regression in women's rights, education, or agency, nor does it translate into rising fertility, widespread child marriage, or rampant polygamy as might have been previously anticipated by some. Almost three decades after *Reformasi*, Indonesia continues to see declining total fertility rates (below replacement level), decreasing marriage rates, and increasing divorce rates (*Utomo et al.* 2022; *Wisana/Setyonaluri* 2024). Instead of demanding adherence to Shariah law, what we found was that halal love reflects a dynamic interplay between certain aspects of desecularisation and modernity, illustrating that religious revival can coexist with socio-economic transformation (*Akmaliah* 2024; *Beta* 2019). Our informants demonstrate agency in navigating diverse interpretations of Islamic authority regarding lawful and acceptable romantic practices. Their choices highlight the dynamic and historically specific nature of religious interpretations in contemporary Indonesia. In terms of socio-demographic implications, these findings suggest, first, that halal love does not necessarily equate to early or teenage marriage, and second, that ideals of small-family norms are indeed compatible with contemporary narratives of halal love and of the *Hijrah* movement more broadly.

While limited by the small sample size and spread, this study's qualitative insights offer a starting point for addressing the paucity of research on how demographic transitions intersect with broader socio-economic and political changes in democratising Indonesia and the Muslim world. First, by exploring how young people's intimate practices and decisions reflect competing aspirations and constraints, our study addresses the under-theorised aspects of desecularisation in the field of population studies (*Dommaraju/Tan* 2024). The growing appeal of halal love complicates longstanding assumptions, derived from Western-based demographic theories (*Lesthaeghe* 2010), that secularisation is a linear process tied to modernisation, driving marriage and family change in Indonesia and Islamic Southeast Asia. Instead, our findings support the argument that heightened identity politics amidst growing economic inequality and precarity in the Majority World are shaping distinct trajectories of democratisation (*Asad* 2007; *Bayat/Herrera* 2010) and family formation (*Janson* 2019; *Pettit* 2019). Second, our study responds to the calls for more interdisciplinary research on religion and transition to adulthood (*Jung/Park* 2020). Indonesia's demographic window of opportunity unfolded during a period of political upheaval, economic precarity in formal-sector employment, and a global religious revival shaped by youth online culture (*Rakhmani/Utomo* 2023). This complex environment shapes young adults' transitions to marriage and family, where Islamic ideals intersect with socio-economic realities and further shape their competing aspirations and constraints (*Nilan* 2008; *Nilan et al.* 2016; *Smith-Hefner* 2019). Through exploring halal love, we extend the idea of hybridisation of values

surrounding marriage and family change proposed by the developmental idealism framework (*Thornton et al.* 2015), showing possible recursive sequences in which Islamic revival intersects with longstanding DI ideals about what an accessible, meaningful, viable transition to marriage should and could be like.

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Statement
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