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Eliasian Themes

## Understanding halal food production and consumption in 'the West'. Beyond dominant narratives

JOHN LEVER

*University of Huddersfield*  
E-mail: [j.b.lever@hud.ac.uk](mailto:j.b.lever@hud.ac.uk)

**Abstract.** In recent decades, the increasing visibility of halal food has become highly emotive and controversial, with halal meat in particular being seen as an indicator of the growing presence of Islam and what are seen to be 'barbaric' Muslim food practices. In this paper, I move beyond these dominant narratives to demonstrate how, as the UK halal market has expanded, and the range of halal food options has increased, Muslim consumers have been compelled to justify their halal food choices in ever more complex ways. Within the sociology of food literature, the proliferation of food choice often draws on the notion of informalisation to illustrate the dissolution of structures governing food production and consumption. Here, drawing on insights from Eliasian sociology, I present a more compelling account of informalisation, not only to move beyond the notion of halal as a 'barbaric' practice, but to illustrate that Muslim and non-Muslim consumers have very similar concerns and anxieties about food production and consumption.

**Keywords:** figurations, food production and consumption, halal practice, informalisation, Muslim consumers.

### INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the twentieth century the economic foundations of Western diets were transformed in ways that created possibilities to eat in much more varied ways (Warde 2016). In the intervening decades, ethnic food has become a central element of food markets in consumer societies (Belasco and Scranton 2001). The ongoing expansion of the global halal market must be seen in this light, and there is now an emerging body of research exploring how Muslims consume and practice halal in an everyday context in «the West» (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015; Fischer 2011; Lever 2013; Lever and Fischer 2018; Siddiqui 2012; Toğuşlu 2015).

In Arabic, the word *halal* literally means «permissible» or «lawful». In relation to food in particular it signifies «purity» and is protected by certain Islamic principles, most notably the avoidance of pork and alcohol (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015; Armanios and Ergene 2018). There are also important considerations about the slaughter of animals for food. Indeed, given the prior sacrificial significance of slaughter in near eastern culture (Fischler 2011), it has long been accepted that to be fit for human consumption meat must come from slaughtered animals. Over time, however, differences have emerged between *People of the Book* (Jews, Christians and Muslims) about the acceptability of stunning animals before slaughter (Lever 2019). Until recently, all meat produced by Christian and Jews was considered acceptable by the vast majority of UK Muslims (Lever and Miele 2012). In recent decades, however, the standardised industrial practice of stunning animals before slaughter has been contested by a growing minority of Muslims in line with controversy about war in the Middle East and debates about what it means to live a religious life in Western societies (Marranci 2009; Siddiqui 2012; Toğuşlu 2015; Armanios and Ergene 2018; Lever 2019).

In this context, halal has become highly complex, emotive and controversial – with halal meat in particular being seen as an indicator of the growing presence of Islam and what are seen to be ‘*barbaric*’ Muslim food practices (Mukherjee 2014; Grumett 2015). In the UK, much of the controversy revolves around the production of halal meat from non-stunned animals and perceived threats to animal welfare and national identity (Lever 2019), with much of the halal literature focusing on the underlying issues (that is, certification and methods of slaughter) (e.g. Lever and Miele 2012; Fuseini et al. 2020). In this paper, I move beyond the insights provided in this literature to demonstrate how, as the UK halal market has expanded, and the range of halal dining options has increased, Muslim consumers have been presented with increasingly difficult food choices.

Unlike other ethnic foods and cuisines, halal is not associated with a particular cuisine or national territory (Armanios and Ergene 2018). In the last decade or so, it has thus become a particularly attractive option for fast food restaurants, discounting pizza and pasta chains, and a wide range of eating establishments. While a number of Muslim requirements have already been met in the global food industry to allay Muslim anxiety about contamination (from pork and alcohol) during industrial production (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015; Armanios and Ergene 2018), these developments have increased market complexity and consumer anxiety considerably.

Within the sociology of food literature, the notion informalisation is often used in this context to illustrate the dissolution of structures underpinning the proliferation of food choice (Warde 1997; Warde and Martens 2000; Warde 2016; Paddock et al. 2017). While these accounts provide useful insights, they fail to fully recognise, I contend, Wouters’ (1977; 1986; 2008; 2011) claim that processes of informalisation increase demands for greater self-discipline and emotional self-management within the contours of the civilising process (Elias 2012). Indeed, as questions of what to eat, where to eat and how to comport the body become more open to judgement, Wouters’ work suggests that the need for more elaborate forms of justification increases, and that consumers require greater self-discipline when deciding what and what not to eat. Drawing on this conceptual apparatus and body of work, in this paper I explore the increasingly complex food choices Muslim consumers encounter when deciding what is and is not acceptable halal practice.

The paper starts off by outlining the research context and the methods employed. It then explores how notions of anxiety, anomie, and informalisation have been used in the sociology of food literature to contextualise the dissolution of structures governing food production and the proliferation of food choice from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This is followed by an investigation of the ways in which traditional halal practices (arriving via migrants from South Asia) intersected with various developments in the food industry and global politics to lay the foundations for the emergence of the UK halal market. Drawing on empirical material from a study of halal production and consumption in Manchester, I then provide a detailed analysis of the changing practice of halal consumers, which helps us to move beyond simple discursive understandings of halal as a ‘*barbaric*’ practice. I conclude with some reflections on the implications of this analysis for understandings of consumption practices and the future trajectory of the civilising process.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

Empirically the paper builds on research undertaken over the last decade (Lever and Miele 2012; Bergeaud-Blackler et al 2015; Lever and Fischer 2018). More specifically, it draws on a small qualitative study of middle-class Muslim consumers in Manchester in the UK, which examined how historical, political and institutional settings shape the market for religiously certified food products and particular forms of consumer understanding and practice<sup>1</sup>.

Religious food consumers were selected and recruited via a snowball sampling strategy initiated with personal and professional contacts, which facilitated purposive recruitment from across the wider city region. Although the Muslim population in the UK and Manchester is highly diverse, the vast majority have roots in South Asia, and our sampling strategy pivoted towards this demographic by default. Muslim consumers from other countries and regions were also recruited, but the political contestation revolving around halal meat at the time appeared to hinder wider recruitment. It was also difficult to recruit older Muslims, who didn't recognise the significance of the research to the same extent as younger participants.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews to explore overarching themes of religion, regulation and consumption identified in the literature (Bergeaud-Blackler et al., 2015; Fischer 2011; Lever and Fischer 2018; Sid-diqui 2012; Toğuşlu 2015). Interviews were complimented with sustained periods of participant observation (visiting food businesses, certifiers, religious and community-based organisations) to develop a close understanding of the pressures and challenges faced by participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, before interview and observational data were open coded in excel to identify key themes revolving around the overarching themes identified above. Analysis of various texts, notably certification requirements and online food guides, was also conducted. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper protect the anonymity of participants, who are listed in Table 1 below.

## INFORMALISATION AND THE PROLIFERATION OF FOOD CHOICE

Within the sociology of food literature, informalisation is often understood to illustrate the dissolution of structures governing national food cultures and cuisines (see Poulain 2012). Fischler (1980) and Warde (1997)

**Table 1.** Muslim Consumers in Manchester.

Name/ Gender	Age	Occupation	Country of birth (cultural heritage)	Marital status/ children
Ahmed (M)	Late 40s	University Professor	Egypt	Married/ 3 children
Iffat (F)	Late 20s	Lawyer	UK (Pakistan)	Single
Imran (M)	Mid 30s	Community Worker	UK (Pakistan)	Married/ 3 children
Hussein (M)	Late 30s	Restaurant Manager	Egypt	Married/ 2 children
Javid (M)	Early 40s	Secondary School Teacher	UK (Pakistan)	Married/ 3 children
Khadija (F)	Mid 30s	Pharmacist	Nigeria	Married/ 3 children
Omar (M)	Late 30s	General Practitioner	UK (Pakistan)	Married/ 3 children
Rabia (F)	Early 20s	Cook/ Waitress	UK (Pakistan)	Single
Rida (F)	Mid 20s	Trainee Lawyer	UK (Pakistan/India)	Single
Shabbir (M)	Mid 60s	Engineer/ Bus Conductor	Pakistan	Married/ 3 children
Saeed (M)	Late 40s	Research Fellow	Bangladesh	Married/ 3 children
Tabraiz (M)	Early 40s	Imam	South Africa	Single
Ibrahim (M)	Late 30s	Businessman	UK (Pakistan)	Married/ 2 children
Abid (M)	Early 40s	Imam	UK (Pakistan)	Married/ 3 children
Farrokh (M)	Late 40s	Shop Owner	UK (Pakistan)	Married/ 2 children

<sup>1</sup> This was part of a larger study of kosher and halal food production and consumption in Manchester in the UK and Copenhagen in Denmark.

both drew on Durkheim's notion of anomie to emphasise the loosening of social-constraints associated with the proliferation of food choice in this sense. Given these trends, the question underpinning much research in food scholarship in recent decades has not surprisingly focussed on the question of «why people eat what they do?» (Warde 2016: 80). If this was simply a matter of free choice, it would stupefy most individuals, and many studies have not surprisingly focused on the nature of consumer anxiety. This situation is evident most clearly in Fischler's (1980) notion of gastro-anomie, which suggests that while humans can, as omnivores, consume and digest a wide range of foods, they must also avoid foods that are biologically harmful. Consequently, as the food industry has expanded, and food has choice proliferated, Warde (2016: 80) argues that the anxiety associated with the paradox has also increased to facilitate a «crisis of gastronomy».

Recent studies drawing on informalisation have emphasised the changing significance of the meal and eating out among the middle classes (Warde 1997; Warde and Martens 2000; Paddock et al. 2017; Warde 2016). While people eat outside the home more often than they did twenty years ago, Paddock et al. (2017) suggest that the casualization and simplification of eating out means that the middle classes now spend less time eating, do not dress up to the extent, and eat alone more frequently than they once did. While these accounts provide useful background information into the changing contours of halal food consumption and practice, I argue that informalisation is better viewed as part of the increasing demand for greater self-discipline and emotional self-management (Wouters 1977; 1986; 2008; 2011) when deciding what is and is not acceptable. Warde (2016) appears to recognise the significance of Wouters' work in this sense. But there is increasing recognition that by positioning practices (rather than individuals and social structures) at the heart of social analysis ontologically, theories of practice fail to adequately consider the ways in which relations of power shape and contextualise practices (Sayer 2013) in the face of «global flows of capital, corporate interests, brands and advertising» (Evans 2019: 511).

Wouters' discussion of the relaxation of societal, workplace and sexual relations from the 1960s onwards (and the ensuing deregulation of a plethora of social practices) provides a much more insightful way, I contend, of examining the pressure created by the ongoing expansion of global food markets. Indeed, while Wouters' account of informalisation reflects changes in the balance of power between diverse social and cultural groups, it also reflects, he argues, «the discovery and expression of hitherto concealed emotions as a prerequisite for knowing oneself» (1986: 4). As we observe throughout this paper, these trends emphasise a central aspect of the European civilising process (Elias 2012); that is, the long-term shift, within increasingly complex figurational settings, in the balance between external *social constraints* (control by *other people* and external institutions) and internal *self-restraints* (control by oneself, without the immediate presence of other people). There is, we could say, in this context, a tilting of the balance of habit (and hence practice) in the steering of behaviour and feeling, from the former towards the latter.

For Elias (2012), figurations can be understood through the notion of «social dances». A social dance lasts for an extended period of time; those dancing at the start are unlikely to be dancing at the end; the music will change; people will arrive and leave; but the dance will go on. Conceptually, figurations are thus always in flux, a process of becoming (Stanley 2017). They highlight the asymmetrical power relations that bind individuals and groups together in dynamic networks of social, economic and political interdependence that exist independently *of*, but not *without*, the individuals and groups that comprise them; and which cut across the agency–structure divide (in cities, states and markets, for example) to facilitate unanticipated and often unintended outcomes (Connolly and Dolan 2017).

In a foundational text in the sociology of eating, Mennell (1985) uses these insights to explore the increasing pressure towards self-control around eating from the late Middle Ages onwards. While *diminishing* contrasts between social groups were a central feature of these developments over the long term, he argues that *variety* in food choice was also central to the emergence of consumer societies during the late twentieth century. Indeed, as social relations became less unequal, and processes of informalisation (Wouters 1999) spiralled with complex figurational settings, Mennell (1985) shows that the practice of eating became ever more complex, and that it became increasingly difficult to disentangle the aesthetic and nutritional aspects of food habits from each other.

This complex interplay of food habits has continued to grow in consumer societies (Belasco and Scranton 2001) in line with the rise of «immigrant cuisines» (Mennell 1985) – and a potential «global cuisine» (Mennell

et al. 1992) – to which the rise of the global halal food market can now be aligned (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015; Armanios and Ergene 2018; Lever and Fischer 2018). Indeed, as the empirical analysis of halal consumption and practice in this paper demonstrates, the underlying process of informalisation not only allows us to understand the increasingly complex food choices Muslim now encounter in “the West”, it also allows us to see that Muslim and non-Muslim consumers have (very) similar rather than (extremely) disparate concerns about food production and consumption. It is to these issues that I now turn.

## TRADITIONAL HALAL PRACTICE

The presence of Muslims in the UK can be traced back at least three centuries to the activities of East India Company, but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that Yemini sailors known as *lascars* started settling in port towns and cities in greater numbers (Ansari, 2009). Muslim cafes were still evident around Manchester and Salford docks in the early 1950s (Halliday 1992). However, concerns about halal food did not emerge until migration from the Indian subcontinent began to increase in the following decades (Lever and Fischer 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

South Asian migrants were the carriers of religious food practices and in the absence of halal food such practice could be difficult to maintain. Shabbir remembered how he practiced halal in this context:

When we came in this country in 1966, we used to buy from the Jewish shop because we know... they slaughter our way... I'd also... go to the farm, have the chicken, and halal slaughter it myself.

As Manchester's south Asian Muslim population expanded, however, south Asian cafés and grocery stores selling halal meat and other south Asian foods began to proliferate. Many south Asian café owners were originally factory workers who went into business to provide food for their fellow workers (Buettner 2008). Saeed, originally from Bangladesh, remembered his childhood in Manchester in this context:

I remember coming down to an Asian cafe in Rusholme for halal lunches of samosas, breads and curries for workers in my uncle's factory in Ancoats [in central Manchester].

Working-class cafes continued to serve south Asian customers in the coming decades. Over time, however, relations between a new generation of UK consumers (eager to escape the limitations of the nation's culinary practices) and South Asian restaurateurs (eager to expand their business interests) changed in unforeseen ways to facilitate the rise of «curry culture» (Buettner 2008).

As social relations became less unequal and processes of informalisation spiralled throughout the 1960s (Wouters 1999), the number of south Asian cafes, restaurants and chefs grew rapidly, and a younger generation of UK consumers were gradually recruited to the culinary tastes of south Asian gastronomy (Buettner 2008). Although not the sole influence, students played a significant role in these developments, and many of the first south Asian restaurants targeting non-Muslims opened near university campuses (Jamal 1996). Wilmslow Road stretching out through Fallowfield to the south of the city centre past the University of Manchester was a typical city high street in the late 1960s. Less than two decades later, however, numerous south Asian cafes and restaurants had appeared on what would soon become known as the *Curry Mile*.

These developments also laid the foundations for the emergence of south Asian food manufacturers and wholesalers. Some of these businesses, anticipating wider processes of supermarkization and globalization (Kjærnes et al. 2007), eventually started supplying mainstream supermarkets with south Asian products (samosas and chutneys, for example) for the first time (Werbner 1999). As we shall see, it was in this changing figurational context that traditional halal practices became ever more aligned with the mainstream food sector – developments that would, over time, increase the pressures face by Muslim consumers considerably.

<sup>2</sup> Similar concerns emerged around Jewish migrants and kosher practice a century earlier (Lever 2019).

## TOWARDS MAINSTREAM HALAL PRACTICE

Although there were debates about the presence of halal food throughout the post-war period, it was not until the early 1980s that debate intensified as a result of controversy over the provision of halal meat in schools in Bradford in West Yorkshire (Lever 2019). The ensuing political fallout led to the emergence of the nation's first halal certification body – The Halal Food Authority (HFA)<sup>3</sup>, which emerged in 1994 to protect Muslim interests (Ansari 2009). Over the next decade or so, the HFA operated largely unchallenged, aligning traditional halal food practices with the formalized rules and standards of the European regulated meat industry that require all animals to be stunned before slaughter (Lever and Miele 2012). From the early 2000s, however, as war in the Middle East intensified debate about what a religious life in ‘the West’ entailed, halal food began to take on a wider significance for growing numbers of Muslim consumers (Marranci 2009; Siddiqui, 2012; Lever 2013; Toğuşlu 2015; Armanios and Ergene 2018).

It was at this juncture, as the global halal market began to expand (Bergeaud-Blackler et al., 2015), that the more orthodox Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC)<sup>4</sup> emerged. The UK Muslim population was also expanding at this time, numerically and also geographically out of the inner city areas where they had originally settled (Lever 2019)<sup>5</sup>. In this increasingly complex figurational setting, the HMC set out to realign halal meat production with traditional halal practices, thus intensifying debate about halal considerably (Lever and Miele 2012). While the HFA had quietly aligned traditional Muslim food practices with scientific consensus about the animal welfare benefits of pre-slaughter stunning over the previous decade, the HMC set about challenging this position by presenting traditional halal practice and non-stunned slaughter as “authentic” halal (Lever and Miele 2012)<sup>6</sup>. As animals must be alive at the time of slaughter for meat to be considered halal, the HMC claims that the standardised stunning techniques used throughout the food industry heighten the risk of death before slaughter, thus leaving «a huge doubt into the halalness» of industrially produced meat and poultry<sup>7</sup>. From this point onwards, the HMC thus became increasingly popular among Muslim butchers, cafés and restaurant owners in areas of towns and cities with a large Muslim population – in and around the Curry Mile in Manchester, for example.

## CONTROVERSY, MARKET TRANSPARENCY AND MISUNDERSTANDING

When the UK halal market was starting to expand around the turn of the twenty-first century, stunned halal meat and poultry were often produced at different times, or on different production lines (within the same slaughterhouses and meat processing factories), as non-halal meat and poultry<sup>8</sup>.

As the market for non-stun halal meat and poultry continued to expand and become more visible through the HMCs work with the branding agency National Halal<sup>9</sup> and corporate retailers such as Tesco<sup>10</sup> (see Figure 1), it became increasingly controversial (Lever 2019). Indeed, as an emergent process of *formalisation* – characterised by nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment – spiralled alongside the prevailing process of *informalisation* (Wouters 1986; 2011), many UK food businesses and their certification partners responded by making halal meat from stunned animals harder to identify by removing information about slaughter methods. While this helped to protect commercial interests in the larger market for stunned halal meat, it also intensified debate in the much smaller market for non-stun meat, thus increasing misleading media reports about the role and place Muslims in wider

<sup>3</sup> The Halal Food Authority (<https://www.halalfoodauthority.com>).

<sup>4</sup> The Halal Monitoring Committee (<https://halalhmc.org>).

<sup>5</sup> Between 2001-2011, the UK Muslim population expanded from 1.55 million to 2.71 million (ONS, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> A useful account of debates about the spiritual aspects of meat production is provided by Farouk et al. (2014).

<sup>7</sup> <https://halalhmc.org/resources/issues-of-mechanical-slaughter-and-stunning/> (consulted on 5th July 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Very often, the only difference was the recital of a prayer by a Muslim worker at the time of slaughter (see note 13 below)

<sup>9</sup> Today National Halal promotes itself as the most ethical and established halal food brand in UK and Europe (<http://nationalhalal.com>).

<sup>10</sup> Tesco is a multinational retailer based in the UK.



**Figure 1.** National Halal Meat Centre, Tesco Manchester.

society (Lever 2019). As Elias (2012) argued in *On the Process of Civilisation*, while some things are essential for society to function effectively (Lever and Milbourne 2017), things that offend civilised sensibilities – in this case, halal food – *must* be hidden from public view though a wider process of quarantine and concealment (Lever 2019).

Research conducted over the last decade confirms that debates among Muslims about slaughter practice and stunning methods are characterized by a high level of misunderstanding (Lever and Fischer 2018). While Rabia, for example, states that she only eats halal meat, this is because, as she understands it, all halal meat in the UK comes from non-stunned animals, when most actually comes from pre-stunned animals (Lever and Miele 2012; Lever 2019, FSA, 2019).

Although Javid believes that stunning is '*not really a big deal*', he also suggests that it can still be very difficult, given this lack of market transparency, to know who to trust and how to make an appropriate judgement when eating at international restaurant chains that offer halal food options:

A lot of my friends and family eat at Nando's because it is halal, I haven't got a problem with them eating at Nando's because it is halal as far as I know. I don't eat at Nando's... largely because I can't see how ... that amount of meat is slaughtered in a halal way over so many stores.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Nando's is a South African restaurant chain that specialises in Portuguese-African food, including flame-grilled chicken.

Ahmed questions the motives of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)<sup>12</sup> in a similar way, asking how it is possible to sell “halal” chicken in some restaurants in Manchester and not in others:

[I]n KFC in the Arndale [Shopping Centre] you will find a big sign halal, but in the same branch in the Trafford [Shopping] Centre it doesn't exist, and when you ask, no this branch is not halal... how they can guarantee the whole process, I don't know.

Khadija has similar concerns, and to eliminate the possibility that any chicken she ingests may have been killed by stunning she only consumes non-stunned chicken:

Because there's a question mark on the stunning of the animal I go for the HMC, the Halal Monitoring Committee because they scrutinise the stunning especially on a small animal [chickens]. So, I go for HMC as opposed to the other [HFA].

Although Muslim anxieties about potential contamination from pork and alcohol during industrial production have been widely recognised (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2015; Armanios and Ergene 2018), it also appears that Muslim consumers have similar concerns to non-Muslim consumers – often about the same foods, including chicken (Jackson 2015).

In situations where halal business practices *are* visible to consumers, they are often adjacent to a wide range of practices that are again questionable for Muslims. For example, restaurants often sell halal and non-halal products on the same menu, thus increasing concern and anxiety in different ways. Khadija's insights are again instructive:

When I'm eating out in a restaurant... some of them say... the chicken is halal, but the beef isn't, so then you know how to order. So, you ask, wherever you go you ask.

Ahmed and Hussein have a different approach. When they find themselves in a situation where they are unsure whether their meat is halal, they simply recite *Bismillah* (in the name of God/ God is great) to alleviate any concerns, although they admit that they find the experience disconcerting<sup>13</sup>.

Ibrahim is far stricter, but he faces similar challenges, and he argues that selling halal meat in the same restaurant as non-halal meat is totally unacceptable:

What people don't realise is that halal isn't just about how it is slaughtered, it is a status, you can slaughter something halal, but if it's not a halal restaurant it is immediately cross-contaminated.

Similar trends are evident in neighbourhood shops, butchers and bakeries. While the shop owner Farrokh claims that «it is not possible to sell halal meat these days without HMC certification», Javid notes that this position is politically and commercially contested:

Most animals in the UK are stunned and there's a position within Islamic law that allows for that. So stunning... is a bit of a political issue... and it's often used commercially.

In this context, as Tabraiz notes, it is thus often «left to the individual to ascertain... which [certification] organisation... [is] more reputable».

While many Muslim consumers still take what their fellow Muslims say at face value, the increasing politicization of halal has lessened trust between Muslims considerably. Abid explained how going to a bakery with a friend not far from the Curry Mile led to a heated argument about what could legitimately be classed as halal. When his friend offered to buy him lunch, Abid chose a product that was sold as halal, but his friend refused to pay for it because it was not certified by the HMC. Abid explained:

<sup>12</sup> KFC is an American fast food chain that specializes in fried chicken.

<sup>13</sup> This practice is usual before the act of animal slaughter, when slaughterers invoke the name of Allah (tasmiyya) by saying Bismillah (“In the name of God”) followed by Allah Akbar (“God is Great”).



So I got a chicken pasty and he said is it HMC. And the lady behind the counter said no it's not HMC, but I can guarantee it's halal, but he said he didn't want it. But then the lady behind the counter got a bit upset... She said look, "I'm telling you it's halal, you know you should be taking my word for it, it's halal, but you're not going to have it just because it's not HMC".

As this discussion illustrates, trust is as much of an issue as slaughter and certification practice for many Muslim consumers.

## INCREASING MARKET COMPLEXITY AND INFORMALISATION

The processes of informalisation spiralled considerably after the 2008 recession (Paddock et al. 2017). By 2016 Muslims were estimated to be spending £4.64 billion (around 8% of the UK's total food and drink spend) on halal, with Muslims also claiming to eat outside the home more often than other socioeconomic groups (Stannard and Clarke 2020). Unsurprisingly, the number of online guides promoting eating out for halal also proliferated during this period (Armanios and Ergene 2018). Take the Halal Dining Club, for example, which promotes eating out for halal food in Manchester alongside sport, art and other cultural pastimes, and Halal Food Gastronomy, a similar online guide (see Figure 2). As these guides illustrate, the rise of the *foodie* – in this case the *Haloodie*<sup>14</sup> – can be linked to the rapid growth in eating out during this period, and with varied and distinctive ways of eating foods that are often seen to be (but not always are) of a higher authenticity, quality or aesthetic register (de Solier 2013; Warde 2016).

This has changed the social etiquette around eating out for halal significantly, as Iffat noted:

Here in Spinningfields in Manchester alone there's about fifteen halal restaurants within a mile proximity. There's a halal Brazilian, there's a halal Italian, there's halal Turkish, Spanish... so it's all very readily available now, which is good... for the palate.

Second and third-generation Muslims are now much likely, it appears, to try a greater variety of cuisines than first generation Muslims (Stannard and Clarke 2020). But in complex figurational settings where it is increasingly difficult to know what to eat, where to eat and how to comport the body, it also seems clear that the need to be more questioning when deciding what is and is not acceptable halal practice has increased likewise. When Rabia, for example, eats out with friends and doesn't know the café or restaurant, she looks at the menu, and if she doesn't like what's on offer, she just orders fish. Rida makes a similar point. On the one hand, when she goes out with non-Muslim friends to places that don't serve halal food, she simply has the fish or vegetarian option. On the other hand, when she goes to an Asian restaurant with her family, she will order halal steak and chips or halal lasagne, although if she is unsure, she will always ask for confirmation of where the meat comes from.

When power and status of differentials between diverse social and cultural groups decline rapidly in complex figurational settings, as they have done in this case, Wouters (2008) suggests that embarrassment can become a problem, as things once seen as dangerous (for example, unacceptable food choices) come out into the open. Restaurants are potential sites of embarrassment (Warde and Martens 2000) for Muslim consumers in this sense, I contend, for it is here that contemporary halal practice is negotiated in the presence of (other) Muslim and non-Muslim diners (*and* waiting staff) alike.

While Khadija always asks questions about meat purporting to be halal in the restaurants she frequents, Saeed does not feel comfortable asking such questions, and he tends to make the decision about whether he will eat at a restaurant before he enters. He expressed these feelings strongly, stating that:

That's very difficult... when you see the restaurant's menu you take it that they're... halal ... I wouldn't really go in and ask a manager ... where do you source your meat from? ... I suppose there is a bit of a compromise ... you know, you don't really have that control.

<sup>14</sup> The trademarked term and brand *haloodie* were first used by two UK entrepreneurs in 2013 (see <https://haloodies.com>).

<sup>15</sup> This is a montage of freely available images in the public domain.



Figure 2. Halal Dining Options.<sup>15</sup>

Eating out, I contend, in this context, thus requires greater self-discipline and skill when deciding what to eat, where to eat, and what is and is not acceptable.

Another influential source of tension and anxiety around eating halal revolves around health, diet and nutrition. Medical discourses have had a pervasive influence on Western habits and food has become an important tool for medical interventions to encourage healthy lifestyles (Turner 1982; Warde 2016). This is particularly evident among UK Pakistanis, who are much more likely to suffer health problems than the rest of the population, particularly type two diabetes, because they follow a narrow meat-based diet (Lawton et al. 2007).

Imran has diabetes and he watches what he eats carefully, while Javid and Omar also recognise that the high consumption of red meat in Pakistani communities is highly problematic. Javid goes further, arguing that if what Muslims eat is making them ill, they need to start asking different questions linked to religious and spiritual considerations:

So the question should be how halal is your halal diet, because if it's leading to inevitable illness, and if health is safeguarded within the Quran, then the way we eat and the way we live has to be managed better in order for us to say that it is halal.

Interestingly, while Rabia understands little about actualities of halal meat production, she attaches great importance to what she regards as the spiritual aspects of halal, stating that she associates halal with «thinking about» – or «liking to think about» – animals being killed in the right way. Rida also feels more comfortable knowing that meat has been produced as halal in accordance with Islamic rules, although she agrees that halal is not necessarily healthier, and that it often contains many of the same unhealthy ingredients as non-halal food<sup>16</sup>. As we have seen, this feeds directly into her dining habits and halal consumption practices.

Iffat sums up the complexities around and health, religion and spiritually usefully, illustrating the cultural complexities involved when deciding what to eat and how to comport the body:

<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that certifying nutritionally deficient products as halal is misleading in this sense (Tieman 2016).

I don't think it's healthier. I think it's a little bit more humane to the animal, that's what we're taught, we learn, and we believe, but I don't think it's healthier.

In this context, it seems clear that religious and spiritual considerations often overlap with concerns about diet, health and nutrition, for example, to emphasise ongoing debate about what is and is not acceptable halal practice among diverse groups of Muslim consumers (Siddiqui 2012).

Environmental and ethical issues are also increasingly important considerations (Armanios and Ergene 2018). Saeed notes that he tries to consider animal welfare and environmental issues whenever he can, and he argues that that the ethics of food consumption is a concern «whether you're a believer in a religion or not». Reflecting on this, he adds that for many Muslim consumers halal is now as much about ethics as it is about stunning and certification practices:

People when they're thinking about halal food will also think about how ethically sourced the food was... I mean if it was a battery farmed chicken, for example, it might be slaughtered in a halal manner, but the halalness about how it was raised and kept is often questionable.

Javid indicates that he has similar discussions with his wife about any new products they bring into the home, the overriding concern being to educate their children about what questions they should be asking to live a more appropriate lifestyle. While halal might be part of these discussions, he notes that this isn't always the case, and that they might also talk about the ethics and health implications of their food choices.

## NEW QUESTIONS, NEW JUSTIFICATIONS

In complex figurational settings where it is increasingly difficult to know what to eat, where to eat and how to comport the body, the need to be more questioning when deciding what is and is not acceptable halal practice has clearly increased. It is worth returning to the notion the *Haloodie* briefly at this juncture, not least because it symbolises an important issue for many young Muslims in the UK. While Shabbir, the eldest member of our sample, stated a preference for eating traditional Pakistani food in the family home, younger Muslims with more varied tastes are starting to challenge traditional understandings of what can and cannot be classed as halal. In this context, as Armanios and Ergene (2018: 250) point out, «is this halal?» thus becomes an overriding concern of many young Muslims wishing to «to eat something beyond curry». Asking for halal fish and chips, for example, can thus be seen, they argue, as an expression of a more diverse Muslim identity and, I argue, of new and emerging forms of emotional self-regulation.

Imran and Omar suggest similarly that a new generation of Muslim consumers are much more questioning of food purporting to be halal than their parents, which often pushes them to look for new insights about how to live their lives. New technology is significant in this context, and Rida argues that the proliferation of halal forums on social media discussing the pros and cons of eating at fast food restaurants provide new sources of knowledge about halal. Yet she also notes that this situation places considerable cultural pressure on young Muslims, who have to make their own minds up about the acceptability of specific food and drink products when frequenting an increasing range of retail outlets and dining spaces.

For others, the search for new insight and meaning often involves returning to original religious texts and sources, as Khadija suggests:

I think people are questioning more, people are trying to study more because my feeling is... different types of food keep coming up and different types of cooking keep getting developed, so people are forced to ask these questions and they're forced to actually go back to the sources to study and make decisions.

Imran concurs, arguing that people want more certainty about halal these days, particularly the younger generation, who are highly educated, more questioning, and often more religious, than earlier generations. Halal con-

sumption, we could say, in conclusion, must be read against the backdrop against which it is practiced (Harris 1985; Mukherjee 2014).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Within the sociology of food literature, anxiety, anomie and informalisation have been widely used to contextualise the dissolution of the structures governing food consumption and the ongoing proliferation of food choice. While insightful, in this paper I have drawn on Wouters' account of informalisation, which, I have argued, offers far more compelling insights into the changing contours of food consumption and practice. While Muslim consumers encounter increased anxiety sourcing, purchasing and ingesting halal food in "the West", and feel compelled to justify their halal consumption and practice in ever more complex ways, as we have seen, these developments can be aligned with concurrent processes of formalisation which have led some halal production practices to be pushed from public view. Halal meat, we could say, in this context, is produced in ways that attract Muslim consumers and alienate (some) non-Muslim consumers simultaneously.

Significantly, the Eliasian-inspired account of informalisation presented in this paper moves beyond the notion that halal is a 'barbaric' practice, and to understand that Muslim and non-Muslim consumers have very similar concerns. As we have seen, younger Muslim consumers are developing new forms of self-regulation related to diet, health and nutrition, for example, and to ethical and environmental considerations. It seems wise to conclude that consumers everywhere face similar challenges, and that more research is needed to explore how the development of ethnic and religious food markets impact the contours of the civilising process in unforeseen, unanticipated and often profound ways.

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