



# Canadian Muslim Youth Identity Construction Community Report 2023



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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Canadian Muslim Youth Identity (2022). National Study Report 2022. Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, AB: Author.

# Context

## Overview of the Study

Canada has a Muslim population of over one million people, representing a distinct and divergent group of individuals who share a variety of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (MacDonald, 2015; Tiflati, 2007). Furthermore, the share of the Muslim population in Canada has doubled from two percent in 2001 to 4.9 percent in 2021 (Government of Canada, 2022). Similar to other youth populations, Canadian Muslim Youth (CMY) is a complex social category with its own diverse responses to social and political conditions, as well as global economic changes.

The minority and immigrant status of CMY is reported to impact the identity development process among these youth which is further amplified by the continued wars and conflicts in the Muslim world (Ahmed, 2021). Studies in the past report tensions between the traditional values and beliefs of Muslim youth and the western social context (Blackwood et al., 2013; Jamil & Rousseau, 2012; Kundnani, 2014). These tensions are heightened even further in the context of global conflicts (Jamal et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study, “Canadian Muslim Youth Identity Construction” was to develop an understanding of the broader context in which CMY form and develop their identities, and what factors contribute to, and/or hinder, identity development among these youth. Further, this study aimed to explore how identity development is affected by ongoing global conflicts, collective surveillance, and suspicion against Muslim communities. Considering multiple theoretical perspectives, this study seeks to develop an understanding of the various ways in which identities are negotiated and transformed within larger and conflicting (or contested) religious, political, and cultural contexts. The findings from this research will be used to inform and develop recommendations for government, policymakers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and the wider Muslim community in Canada to support the well-being and positive identity development among CMY.

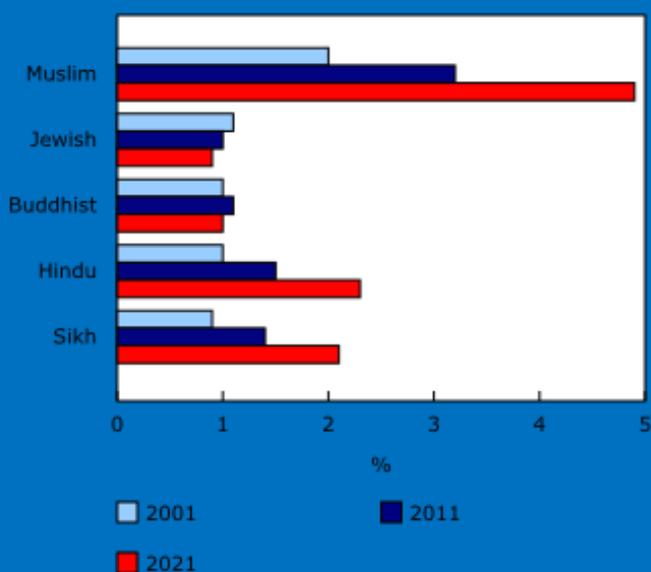


Figure 1. In 20 years, the proportion of the population who have reported adhering to various faiths. (Government of Canada, 2022)[adapted]

## Manuscripts

1. [What it Means to be a Muslim Youth in Canada: A Scoping Review of Empirical Studies \(Link\)](#)
2. ["I Am Not Who You Think I Am": Multiple, Hybrid and Racialized Identities of Canadian Muslim Youth in the Negotiation of Belonging and Citizenship \(Link\)](#)

## Insights from the Literature

Muslim youth face multiple challenges in developing meaningful and stable identities. Continued wars and conflicts in the Muslim world, tensions between traditional values and religious beliefs and the Canadian social context may leave Muslim youth feeling unsupported and misunderstood as they develop a unique Muslim Canadian identity. The consequent feelings of disconnection may lead to the rejection of conventional social norms and institutions by Canadian Muslim youth. There are well-documented studies exploring issues and challenges faced by Muslim youth in the general Western context, such as discrimination and Islamophobia, media portrayals of Muslims, intersectional identities, and mental health. However, we seek to understand the wider context of such issues by exploring factors which contribute to, and hinder, the development of meaningful and stable Canadian Muslim identity in an era of global conflicts, collective surveillance, and suspicion.

## Contemporary Islamophobia and Canadian Muslims

Despite an agreement with the Canadian political framework, accommodating religious and ethnic practices, and multicultural policies, CMY often report an "overriding sense" of their faith and religion being misunderstood in the broader societal context. In many cases, these feelings have been augmented by their experiences of some form of Islamophobia. The presence and serious impact of Islamophobic sentiments in a Western pluralist society and places such as schools have also been discussed. Different studies exploring the experiences of Muslim students in an urban high school in Ontario revealed preconceived notions about Islam and Muslims among school teachers and students, and found that Muslim students often felt pressured to represent Islam or defend their religion in classrooms (Ahmed, 2016).

According to the Environics Institute, Muslims in the West have been regarded as the "poorly understood" minority religious group, viewed with a generalized feeling of heightened anxiety, stemming from underlying implicit biases against Muslims.

From 2012 to 2015, hate crimes against Muslims increased by 253% in Canada. A 2007 Environics poll revealed that 66% of Muslims were concerned about discrimination, with 30% saying they were “very concerned” (Environics Institute, 2007). These concerns were validated by a 2017 Angus Reid survey that found only 33% of Canadians had favourable views of Islam as compared to other faiths. Further, one-third of the Muslim community in Canada has experienced discrimination, whether based on their religion, their ethnicity, or their language. The contemporary situation and experiences of Muslims in Western society have also led to the use of the term “suspect community” by some researchers and is suggested to have a direct link with the war on terror.

Additionally, Muslim youth seem to have gendered experiences with identity formation, as Islamophobic and anti-Muslim discrimination have been linked more to hijab-wearing women. In Tiflati's study, 20 female participants shared their experiences of feeling personally attacked for their Muslim identities, specifically related to wearing hijabs, which had become a subject of public scrutiny. This led to a prevailing sense of fear associated with being perceived as the “other,” encompassing the stereotypes and parodies commonly attached to migrant groups in Western societies (Tiflati, 2020). Intensification of gendered Islamophobia has been linked to media propagating stereotypes and contributing to a negative understanding of Islam and the hijab in the Western world. A perceived relationship between Islam and the oppression of women has been attributed to Islamophobic sentiments and microaggressions targeting Muslim women.

The association between violent extremism and terrorism committed in the name of Islam has led to the negative portrayal of Muslims in broader Western societies. This stigmatization and bias has also been noted within the Canadian context. Findings from the Angus Reid Institute show that two in five (39%) Canadians outside Quebec have an unfavourable view of Islam with the number increasing to 59% in Quebec (Angus Reid, 2023). Notably, older Canadians are more likely to express very negative views of Islam in comparison to younger Canadian populations (Angus Reid, 2023). An upsurge in global tensions pertaining to Islam and Muslims in the West has led to a political culture of fear and insecurity among Canadian Muslims. These discourses have also shaped a climate of social exclusion and hostility that has found expression in both the broader culture and institutional practices across Canada.

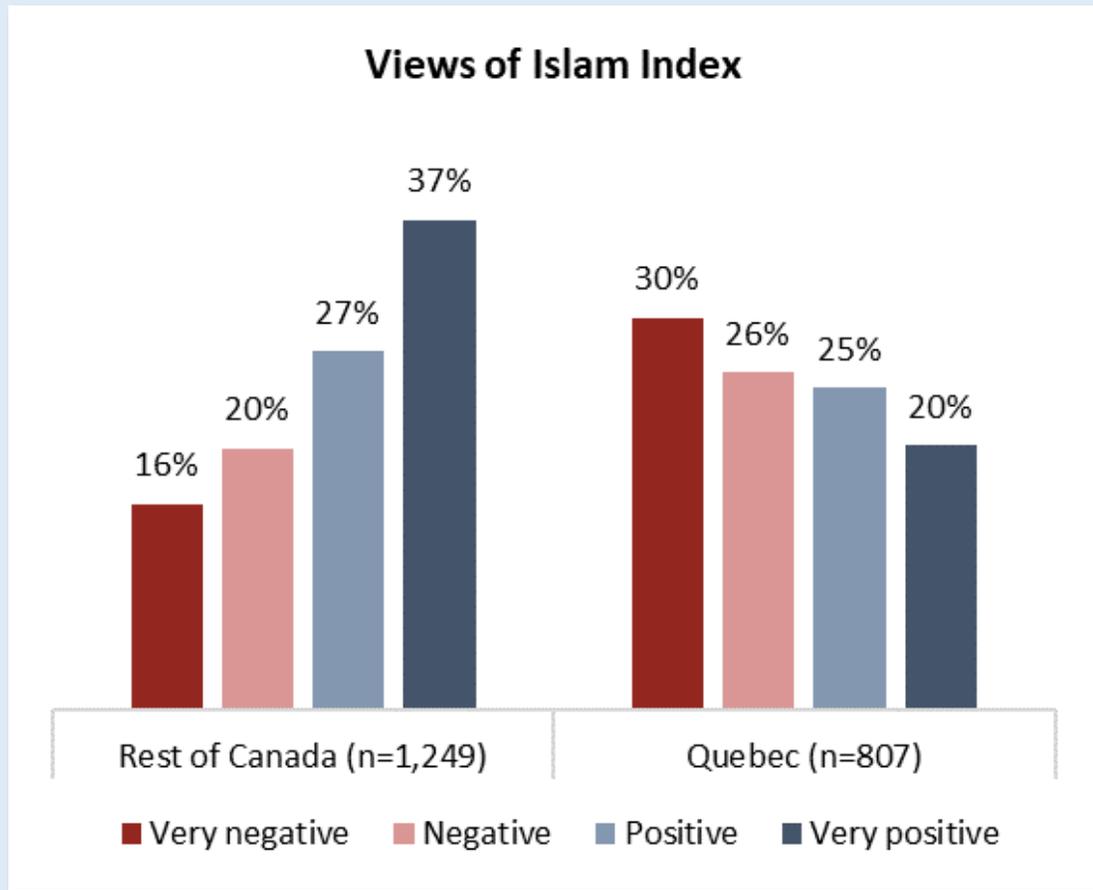


Figure 2. Views of Islam in Canadian society as measured in the Angus Reid Institute “Views of Islam Index” measure (Angus Reid, 2023) [adapted]

## Muslim Youth, Mental Health, and Well Being

Islamophobia, within and outside of post-secondary institutions, leads to isolation, physical and verbal abuse, and lowered self-esteem, which impact an individual’s mental health through increased rates of depression and anxiety (McEwen, 2003). Hodge et al. (2015) found that Muslim Americans who experienced discrimination in the form of verbal harassment (i.e., name-calling) were 3.39 times more likely to report symptoms of clinical depression. Similarly, Muslim American post-secondary students experienced significant increases in depression and anxiety symptoms after perceived discrimination (Lowe et al., 2019). Reinforcement of Islamic spirituality through daily prayers was found to reduce the risk of elevated depressive symptoms (OR=0.74) (Hodge et al., 2016). Conversely, Stuart et al. (2020) found that Muslim identity was predictive for symptoms of depression ( $p < 0.05$ ), possibly due to the high internalized stigma as a response to discrimination experienced by Muslims.

# Approach

## Research Objectives

1. What are the existing identities of Canadian Muslim youth?
2. How do Canadian Muslim youth construct, negotiate, and maintain their individual, communal, religious, and transnational identities?
3. What factors (e.g., gender, religion, education, family background, experiences of discrimination, etc.) impact identity development amongst Canadian Muslim youth?
4. What features of the narrative sense-making environment (the pool of collectively available narratives on which individuals draw in making sense of their experience) justify or support some young Muslim Canadians' move to extremism?
5. What avenues and strategies of prevention and disengagement do stakeholders (such as Muslim community, religious leaders, political leaders, and Islamic scholars) see as most promising in positive youth development?

## Research Plan

This research study comprises of two major phases which include gaining perspectives on identity formation of CMY with direct interactions with the youth themselves (**in the study phase 1: Narrative Inquiry**) and with the members of Muslim community including religious scholars and leaders (**in the study phase 2**). This community brief discusses the preliminary findings from the phase 1 of the study which included in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of Muslim youth from Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver. This was followed by focus group discussions among these youth to gain an insight into the narrative identity of CMY and their reflections on understanding of their lives within the social, political, religious, and cultural narrative environments.

The project is currently in phase 2 of the research plan. In this phase, we aim to bring together diverse members of the Muslim community and key stakeholders (which include religious scholars and community organizers) to engage in reflective conversations and thoughts regarding the process of youth identity formation. Through interviews with the community leaders and Muslim scholars, we hope to collate opinions and collective wisdom from the Muslim community. Muslim religious leaders and scholars (Imams, Ulema respectively), members of Muslim community organizations, and Muslim youth associations will be engaged to share their views and opinions on the religio-political and ideological issues that impact identity construction among CMY.

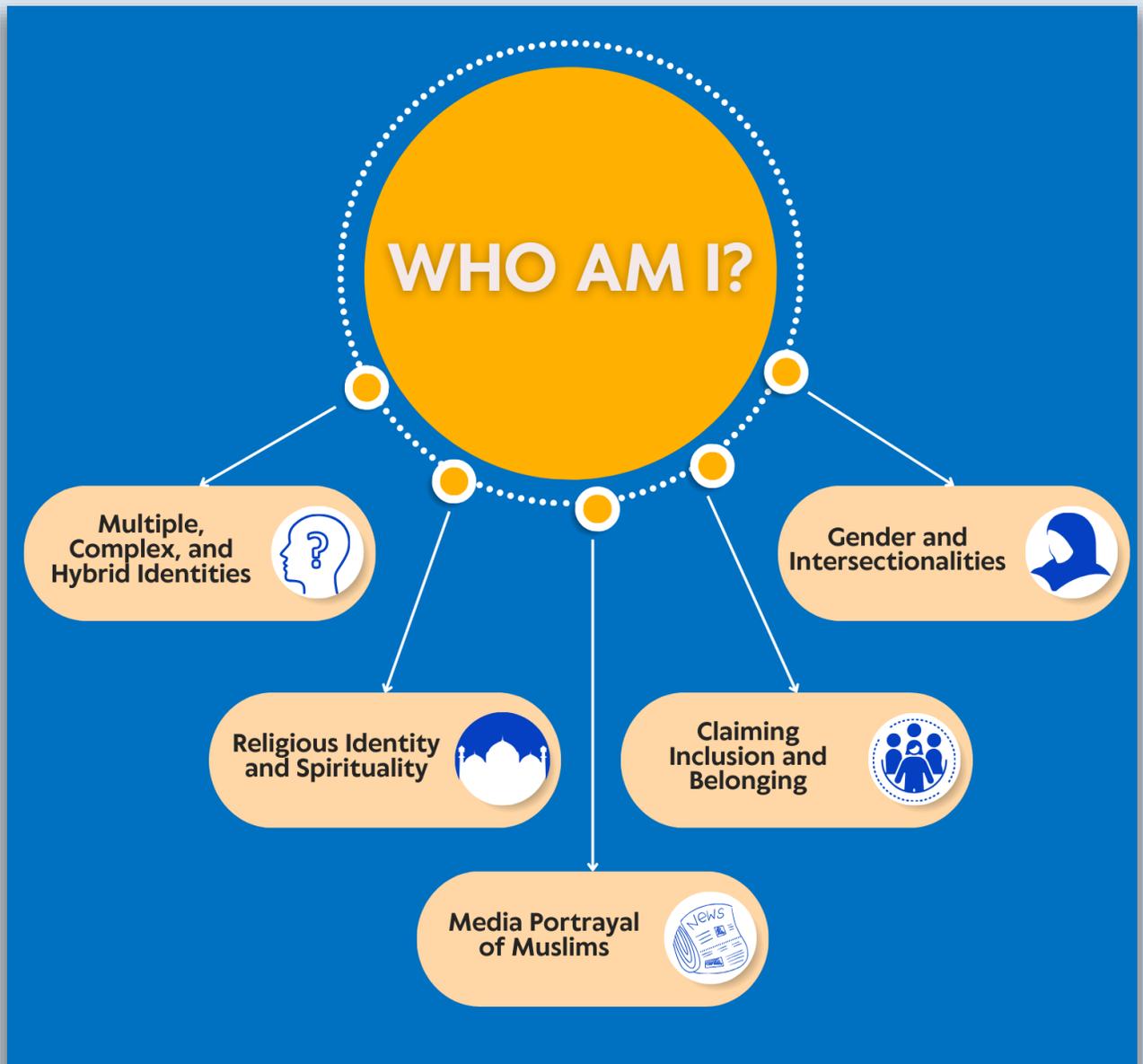


## Field Work

In-depth interviews with 30 Muslim youth from Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver were conducted in the first phase of the study. This was followed by three focus group discussions among the identified participants from all locations. Participants for the phase 1 of the study were identified through social networks within community organizations and mosques in their respective cities. Male and female participants from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds were recruited using snowball sampling technique. Narrative Inquiry methodology (Bamberg, 2011; Frank, 2010) was employed to explore the lived experiences of these participants and how their experiences played role in their identity construction as CMY. All of the interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. This data was then de-identified and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

# Key Findings

While there was an overall recognition and respect for Canadian diversity and multiculturalism policies, the majority of participants expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with the implementation of equity and diversity approaches implemented in Canadian schools and universities. They also consistently conveyed a pervasive sentiment of their faith and religion being misunderstood within the broader societal context, a sentiment that was further amplified by their encounters with various forms of Islamophobia. The study participants also identified racist microaggressions that continue to persist and impact their integration experiences in Canada. Five preliminary themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups:



# Navigating Multiple Complex and Hybrid Identities

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## Key Takeaways:

- ◆ There exists an evident gap between cultural/religious identity and Canadian identity that CMY struggle to reconcile.
  - ◆ CMY face a range of experiences in integrating within Canadian society, with some youth experiencing acceptance and others experiencing feelings of other-ing.
  - ◆ Schools and educational settings serve as a breeding ground for CMY identity negotiations and play a distressing role in identity formation.
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A core goal of the study was to explore how CMY self-identify and how they explain the various contexts of their identity development process. Study participants stated their backgrounds from a variety of countries, with a large number of participants' or their parents' nationalities being from Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia. Although the participants felt integrated within Canadian society, there was an evident gap in establishing a linkage between the two identities from the "home-then" and "home-now." Participants expressed their concern in balancing these distinct identities and found themselves challenged at times while negotiating the complexity of being Muslim and Canadian simultaneously.

Most participants indicated a sense of security pertaining to the immigrant-friendly Canadian system and policies, appreciating the openness and welcoming nature of the wider Canadian society and being contented with the secular education system in Canadian schools and universities. A male participant whose family emigrated from Egypt to Canada recounted:

That's the one good thing about the Canadian schooling system or workplace, they respect your culture, like I still remember when I came here and, the first Friday I was there and my teacher came up to me, she's like, "I believe you guys have to go do prayers on Friday."

Participants expressed having meaningful relationships with non-Muslim Canadians and felt well-supported as members of Canadian society. A university student belonging to a second-generation immigrant family from Indonesia said:

I think Canadians, in general, have really good values...They're all really polite, and some of the people that I've met here who are non-Muslim, and they are Canadian really helped me in my growth and in school in general. I have a lot of really good professors who helped me a lot in school.

## ACTION ITEM

Educational policy changes and educator sensitivity training is essential to fostering a positive learning environment for CMY. When teachers are aware of the challenges CMY face, they are better equipped to support them.

Participants recounted the process of integration into Canadian society while being a religious and ethnic minority. According to participants, the differences in their lifestyle at home and school were fundamental in shaping their identity and individual perspectives. Some participants shared the challenge and concerns of their parents about losing their faith and cultural values in the identity development process. According to some participants, parental insistence to have more Muslim friends in schools and universities played an important role in their identity

construction and brought forward some of the contrasting concepts between the Western and Muslim cultures. A participant from Toronto who immigrated from Pakistan described his sense of identity:

When I got to middle school and grade seven, eight, onwards, I started to realize differences in how 'they' acted and how 'I' acted. Now the turning point for me was, okay, do I fit in with these people, or do I stick with my values with what I was taught at home.

A period of disconnect between their religio-cultural identity and the Canadian identity during their school years was reported by some participants who shared incidents from their high school and university years explaining the negotiation and evolution of their identity throughout their educational journey. According to some participants, the process of identity formation was accompanied by periods of disconnecting and then reconnecting with their cultural and religious identities while growing up in Canada. A second-generation participant from Calgary expressed:

It's interesting, I think it has to do with my growth and the shifts that I've made with my identity. I think I had less of an aversion to making Pakistani and Muslim friends as I got into my high school years, but I didn't really have that many. But now fast forward to my third year, most of my friends are Pakistani origin. Me choosing not to associate strongly with Pakistani and Muslim friends before to now me only having Pakistani and Muslim friends. I think I found more similarities and similar challenges making me connect more strongly with my Muslim friends.

## Religious Identity and Spirituality

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### Key Takeaways:

- ◆ Many CMY find emotional strength in their religious beliefs and turn to their Islamic teachings in times of difficulty.
  - ◆ CMY continually reiterate the importance of local mosques and community centre initiatives in fostering CMY identity through spirituality.
  - ◆ Regardless of varying degrees of religiosity, religion was viewed as a stabilizing force that provided participants with a feeling of belonging.
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The majority of participants exhibited a prominent religious identity, with a tendency to refer to their religious roots and connections when self-identifying or discussing their personal reflections on identity. They consistently expressed their affiliation with Islamic values and teachings, considering them as guiding principles throughout their life. Notably, religious and spiritual attachments were observed to play a significant role during pivotal moments in participants' lives. Participants asserted their belief in Islamic teachings and practices that helped them not only develop a strong Muslim identity but also in navigating through the struggles of everyday life. According to some participants, their spiritual inclination towards Islam made them emotionally stronger. They found that, in most cases their religious teachings and practices do not conflict with Canadian values. Majority of study participants appreciated the positive influence of Islam as a religion in shaping their social identities both at the individual, family and community levels. A participant from Vancouver expressed his connection with religion and spirituality:

I see my friends if they're non-religious whatever and they're struggling in life they really have nothing to fall back on whereas me growing up in a very religious environment and having a very strong faith whenever I'm struggling or when I fail, I can always read these small duas (prayers) that mom has made me memorize. My parents have always taught me these small little things help you psychologically be stronger because you feel that there's a greater being out there that kind of is overlooking you.

Participants indicated the role of their families and the Muslim communities in helping them better understand their religious and social identities. They appreciated the help and support they receive from the Muslim communities and reported multiple instances in which they felt connected and supported by each other as a part of the religious community. A participant from Calgary with an Indonesian ethnic background reported:

The Muslim community, they're all very supportive of each other, like if I don't have a car, a lot of my friends they'll offer me to drive me home or drive me somewhere like those simple things. It kind of lessens the struggles but it also builds the connections between the Muslim youth. Once the youth start helping each other and realize that there's a really good community that can really support me in the future if I stay connected with this community.

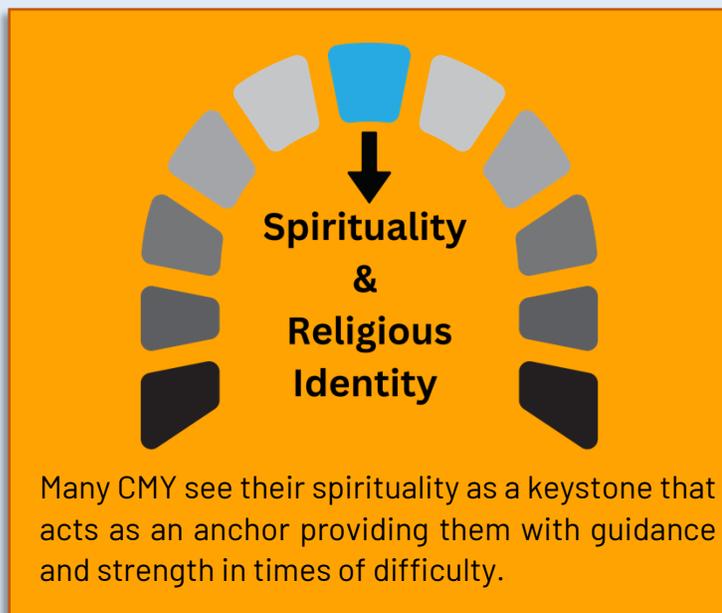
Besides family support, participants also indicated the conscious efforts of mosques and other community members in spreading awareness about their religion which was experienced as having a positive impact on the construction of their identity. One, having grown up in Vancouver with an immigrant family from Turkey, explained his connection with religion:

There was this lady, she has a house near the *Masjid*, and I studied with her for a long time. She brought books and Islamic stuff like that and then she would like teach us about Islam and all the stories.

Help from established Muslim communities to support the settlement of new Muslim immigrants was also appreciated as an explicit positive identity influencer. One participant from Toronto reported:

There was a strong community and there was a prayer room. Growing up I have taken so much from the community as the community has fostered me, whether it be like the after-school, assignment classes or the Sunday schools or just a sense of community by being able to go to the mosque and volunteer and pray...

Researchers found that the majority of participants were satisfied with the Canadian values of multiculturalism and secularism, but some participants also expressed concern about public schools. Their perception is that in formal education, Muslims' cultural and religious values and sensitivities are not well understood and that Canadian education is much more accommodating to other visible groups such as First Nations and Black communities. A Canadian-born female university student from Toronto explained:



**Spirituality  
&  
Religious  
Identity**

Many CMY see their spirituality as a keystone that acts as an anchor providing them with guidance and strength in times of difficulty.

I guess the other challenge for like the Muslim youth, they are being taught certain things at home, but then when they go to school or university or the work-place, there's things that I guess they're not on par with their culture, tradition. And so, it becomes a struggle for them to kind of find that fine line and maintain the balance between who they are and what their values are and to not get distracted by what they're seeing other people do what it looks like.

Regardless of varying degrees of religiosity, religion was viewed as a stabilizing force that provided participants with a feeling of belonging. It also served as a multifaceted means of resistance and opposition to the prevailing narratives that stigmatize Muslims.

## 'I am not who you think I am' - Media Portrayals of Muslims

### Key Takeaways:

- ◆ There exists a consensus among CMY on the negative impact that media portrayals have had on Muslim Youth development across Canada.
- ◆ Media portrayals more directly impact visible Muslims such as hijabi women which further compound challenges in identity formation.
- ◆ Many CMY feel the burden of apology for terrorist acts despite knowing that those acts do not represent them or their religion.

The media was viewed as being a prominent factor in the process of identity formation and representation of Muslims in the Western world as well as in the broader international context. There was consensus regarding the negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam as in large part of the mainstream media. For one, a Canadian-born participant from Vancouver, belonging to a family who immigrated from Afghanistan expressed this as a personal concern as being skeptical about their own name based on the media portrayal of Muslims as terrorists:

You know, my name is Mohamed, and I was not happy with my name, you know, at a young age, I used to think that I want to change my name, and I was like Mohamed is like too common, this is a terrorist name. This is stupid because of the way that our people are...in the media, they put us down, you know, what I'm saying? Media portrays us in a very bad way...

Participants also commented on the resentful and belligerent representation of Muslims and Islam on social media. The perception of Islam as a violent and hostile religion on multiple social media platforms concerned many participants. Participants also related this intensified negative depiction of Islam to the 9/11 incident and shared some of their personal struggles, which impacted the development of their Canadian identity. A female university student from Vancouver, born in Canada whose family immigrated back in the 1980s, was worried about the social media trends and said:

Most of the time you are on the news or you're on social media you'll hear something that's very negative. When a thing comes from a Muslim, we have a label that gets terrorism or Isis or anything like that gets labelled. This label started in 9/11 was a huge, huge thing for us and because we had that label of 'Muslims are terrorists, and they bomb.' In high school, actually in grade eight, when people found out that I was Muslim, they used to say like bomb jokes to me.

This unjust association of Muslims with acts of hostility around the globe was concerning to participants. A female participant from Calgary expressed the double-standards that she saw being presented in the media:

Like international discrimination against Muslims almost, although I don't...I do see it in the media, for example when if there is ever a violent attack committed by a Muslim, it's immediately labelled terrorism as opposed to if it's a person of any other descent, it's not.

The unwarranted and disproportionate association of Muslims with any mis-happenings depicted in media was an outstanding concern for many other participants. One, whose family immigrated from Egypt to Canada, highlighted:

Media...it's interesting, right? If they showed you something like a crash happened here. Two people died. Nobody cares. But if the person that was driving was a Muslim. All of a sudden, it becomes interesting, right? It was a Muslim person. It could have been a mistake but no, a Muslim person ran over two people. So, what is more, interesting to you? Is a Muslim guy running two people over or just a guy running two people over? Right? It makes a big difference, right? So that's how they play.

Canadian Muslims disassociate themselves from the extreme interpretations of religion, believing that violent incidents result from the wrong interpretation of religion and have nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. When it comes to global conflicts and violent incidents around the world, CMY believe some unwell and misguided people are damaging the real message of their religion and serving the cause of others. A university student from Toronto expressed his concerns:

It's a double standard if YOU harm others, YOU are a terrorist and if you're white, then, you're mentally ill. You have to choose between the two. You can say one of the terrorists and one is mentally ill. Nobody goes out and wants to harm people. It has nothing to do with religion.

## Claiming Inclusion and Belonging while Facing Systemic Racism and Discrimination

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### Key Takeaways:

- ◆ CMY with names and clothing that are visibly Muslim report increased incidence of discrimination and other-ing.
  - ◆ Many CMY report facing incidents of bullying and discrimination throughout school directed toward their faith
  - ◆ CMY feel an increased need to “convince” others of their place in Canada and often feel a sense that they are “less Canadian” than others.
- 

Muslim youth in Canada navigate a complex and uncertain existence, grappling with the discomfort and negative perceptions associated with Islam and Muslims deeply rooted in Western consciousness through media and sociopolitical discourse. This struggle becomes even more challenging with recent surges of Islamophobia, making it difficult for them to establish their identities. While participants expressed a certain level of satisfaction with some aspects of Canadian society, they also reported experiencing instances of racism and discrimination. A participant from Toronto shared her high-school experiences:

Also, my first two years of high school, I went to a different high school where it was mainly, I think we're over 50% were like white people and then over there, I faced some racism to ... So basically, making fun of my last name and kind of insinuating that it's like a terrorist name.

For some, the element of otherness and hatred against Muslims was experienced as being amplified after 9/11:

Yeah, growing up there were tons of discrimination like I'd go in transit or something and people would be like saying swears or something. Especially after like 9/11 and everything. So, my parents tell me stories about how when they transitioned here, it was very hard for them after those events.

Another concern expressed by participants was regarding the increased scrutiny and security checks for Muslims at places such as airports with instances of unreasonable questioning of Muslim youth during travel causing distress and embarrassment, as shared by a participant who had moved to Canada from the Middle East:

I think there is like, fifteen people that went ahead of me, and I get stopped and I am like, 'Why are you checking me? ... They are like 'Oh no, it's just the random, randomly selected check' and I am like, 'Really, I am being randomly selected. How come I am randomly selected every time? This is the third airport I have been at, and I am being randomly selected. What is it? You scan my name and Mohammad comes up or something, what's going on?'. I have been a Canadian for twelve thirteen years, so, I don't care what your policy is.



*Need to justify beliefs and actions*

*Embarrassment during travel*

*Being a visible minority*

*Dealing with microaggressions*

*Feelings of otherness*



**SOCIAL ISOLATION**

Study participants asserted a sentimental affection for their religious clothing and dressing. According to some of the participants, wearing a hijab, cultural cap typically associated with Islamic societies, or dressing in a traditional Muslim way strongly connected them to their religion. Participants also shared that their religious clothing was a way to make visible and explain their religious values (such as abstaining from physical touch with the opposite gender) to their non-Muslim counterparts. For example, a second-generation young Canadian with a family background from Indonesia explained:

Sometimes a lot of intimacy, or like you have to shake hands or you have to, yeah with woman and hug. So, when I wear it (a religious cap) it helps them understand that I have different kind of different values or different perceptions of different things. This helps me think or helps me keep my manners in check and help me. The religious clothing reminds me of that I'm still Muslim, so I had to think about my priorities.

Although religious clothing and expression of their religious sentiment with their traditional dressing were appreciated by many participants, there was a feeling of heightened discrimination noted against them associated with this religious expression especially among the female participants. A female participant from Calgary reported:

But they do see us as different because if you wear the hijab, you are treated different. Those kinds of people like in high school they wouldn't talk to me right, or like whereas opposed to if I didn't wear hijab, I'm sure they would. I guess when I didn't wear the hijab like I am more approachable and a lot more people would talk to me.

## Supporting Positive Youth Development

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### Key Takeaways:

- ◆ CMY emphasize the role of local mosques and community centres in providing Muslim Youth with a safe place to develop their identities.
  - ◆ Better representation of Muslims in the media is needed through increased representation and accurate representation of Islamic beliefs.
  - ◆ The role of government is important in providing sensitivity training to secondary schools and universities to better address the needs of Muslim students and facilitate a positive learning environment.
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While sharing their experiences of being Canadian Muslims and expressing their challenges in establishing a strong CMY identity, participants made some notable recommendations and suggestions to change the landscape of Muslim youth development in Canada. Participants shared some novel ideas to better engage the Muslim youth with their communities and promote activities to establish connections among the youth in the community. Participants suggested using some sort of incentive and youth-centered relevant programs for inviting more youth to the mosques and Islamic centers. A participant from Calgary suggested:

“If there’s a gym in the mosque or it’s open for people to come play basketball, it does encourage Muslim youth to come and also pray in the mosque and get to know the community in the mosque as well as I think there’s a lack of that. We don’t typically go to the mosque so, if there is more incentive to actually come to the mosque for the youth ... ”

Participants also shared suggestions to increase awareness about their religion and take collective steps to bring forward an authentic interpretation of Islam. According to participants, Muslim youth in Western societies seek “reasons and rationale” to understand their religion more comprehensively. Mosques and community associations could be potential avenues to support them in this process. Besides giving them a motivation to go to mosques, Muslim communities could play a crucial role in sharing contemporary religious knowledge and awareness among the Muslim youth. A male participant from Calgary explained:

## ACTION ITEM

Local mosques and community centres were referred to by multiple youth as a safe place of learning, community building, and acted as a pillar in their identity formation. It is often difficult for mosques to continue engaging Muslim youth as they do not operate for profits and often have limited funding. Increasing access to these safe spaces for Muslim youth can be in the form of funding for youth programming, accessibility/renovation funding, or increasing community engagement with mosques.

Reminding to do the prayer is important and ‘this is why ...’ Giving a reason is very important, blindly accepting culture bindings of religion isn’t working anymore. Kids are asking WHY... because we’re getting educated. We’re being told in schools to ask WHY... we’re being taught in schools to question more to. Understanding the roots of why things are happening, where these ideas are coming from helps format and inform their understanding.

When we enquired about policy level suggestions, participants indicated the importance of government in shaping the overall representation of Muslims in the larger Canadian society. One notable suggestion was that government could play a critical role in regulating the media to improve the position of Muslims in Canadian society. Study participants highlighted that the media specifically contributes to the perpetuation and endurance of the perception of Muslims as violent. It is crucial to provide media personnel with proper training on how to effectively portray isolated incidents. To address this issue, political leaders need to step forward and take a proactive stance in denouncing Islamophobia and systemic racism against Muslims. A female university student from Toronto stated:

In terms of the news, I don’t think they ever show anything positive happening. It’s always negative in terms of you like... terrorism or things like that. They’re always quick to point the label to terrorism whereas if it’s like a white person, it’s usually labeled as mental illness. So, I definitely think there’s a lot of work to be done in terms of like a Muslim portrayal in the media.

Participants suggested that opportunities to create awareness of Islam and

support from the local and national government bodies in the form of cultural sensitivity programs would positively impact the identity and representation of Muslim youth and Islam in general. A university student from Vancouver whose family immigrated from Afghanistan suggested:

It would be great to have these opportunities or programs to help us spread awareness of Islam and show them what Islam truly is rather than picking it up from the media. For example, each year we have like an open mosque for all, and many non-Muslims come and look at the mosque and get a brief history of the Islam and what Islam means. So that's I guess they should have more of those sorts of incentive just like these programs that help spreading the awareness of Islam and what it means.

# Policy & Practice Recommendations

## Muslim Community Organization Recommendations:

- Redesign how youth are sincerely engaged in decision-making and leadership across institutions and all organization levels (not only youth-related projects).
- Create non-judgmental youth friendly and youth-oriented spaces that are open, accessible and engaging.
- Provide multiple accessible sources for Islamic knowledge that are relevant and easy to understand. Educational programs that strengthen Islamic identity are also recommended, such as history programs focusing on Muslims' civilizational contributions in the past and present.
- Fund and support chaplaincy services on campuses and in prisons and hospitals.
- Extend support and do joint programming with organizations that work with at-risk youth, children's services, foster homes, and shelters. These spaces include youth needing a sense of community and a support system that can be provided in part by these organizations.
- Create an open environment for youth to participate and volunteer to get a sense of belonging through participation. These events and activities should be diverse and accessible, catering to different interests of different types of youth.
- A series of campaigns may also be run by these organizations including:
  - A campaign to remove gender and racial biases in Muslim spaces and centres including a campaign to provide open leadership and real decision-making opportunities for youth.
  - A campaign for artistic expression, poetry, spoken work, video production and many other creative activities from muslim youth, strengthening their Muslim identity.
  - A campaign against structural and cultural Islamophobia at the community, local, and national levels.
  - Create Islamic information kits for Muslims to provide others in different professional spaces such as schools, work environment, camps, etc.

## Canadian Policy and Institutional Recommendations:

- Improving the financial accessibility and funding of Islamic schools and institutional programming.
- Better representation of Muslims with diverse economic statuses on community councils and boards at local and national levels.
- Consult Muslim community leaders and youth to directly understand their specific needs and how to address potential shortcomings.
- Provide social services that meet the needs of economically disadvantaged Muslim youth and support them longitudinally, particularly through financial resources.
- Recognize the stigma veiled Muslim women and doubly racialized Muslims (especially Black Muslims) face external to Muslim communities.
- Building equitable spaces with accessibility for Muslim women in terms of physical space and general programming, understanding the potential added needs of hijabi and/or racialized Muslim women.
- Assisting Muslim families in creating safe, flexible home environments and healthy relationships with their youth.
- Offer financial and career mentorship and paid internships or partner with professionals from all backgrounds to develop and extend such opportunities to Muslim youth.
- Advocate for media, government and businesses that better and more authentically represent Muslim youth overall.
- Build safe, inclusive, non-judgmental spaces headed by diversely representative mentors where youth can learn about Deen but also get support for regular youth issues, mental health support, and build long-lasting friendships in their Muslim peer groups.

## Classroom and Curriculum Recommendations

- Diversify curriculum by opening space for storytelling, counternarratives, and discourse within the classroom.
- Offer spaces for discussion on anti-Muslim racism and the effects that it may have on youth identity formation.
- Encourage student-led initiatives and projects.
- Develop training sessions for educators and staff on the varying needs of Muslim youth and how to better support them in classroom settings.
- Be aware, considerate, and accommodating of religious practices (i.e. fasting during school hours in Ramadan, taking a few minutes to pray during class time, taking days off of school due to Eid, etc.)
- Develop systems for reporting anti-Muslim racism and ensure that students feel supported and comfortable to do so.
- Collaborate with Muslim community leaders and organizations to bring authentic voices and perspectives in to the classroom.

## Youth Proposed Solutions:

- Assist youth leadership in leading the building of non-judgmental, anti-racist, equitable community groups, religious circles and social spaces.
- Train community mentors as religious scholars with mental health training. Ensure that mentors are gendered according to youth needs and preferences (i.e. if there are more male youth, there should be an adequate amount of trained male mentors to accommodate for their needs).
- Provide pathways and resources to access balanced and critical Islamic knowledge.
- Include youth in community centres and masajid decision-making bodies in a meaningful way that does not connote tokenization. Offer or facilitate the development of spaces for youth to meaningfully contribute.

# Conclusion & Implications

Muslim youth are living a complex and uncertain existence in Canada. The discomfort with Islam and Muslims is deeply ingrained in Western perceptions due to media portrayal and sociopolitical discussions. This process is further complicated in the case of the CMY, who struggle to establish their identities with the recent upsurge in islamophobia. Muslim youth, referred to as CMY, face the challenge of navigating various narrative contexts. These include the dichotomy between their "home-then" and "home now" experiences, the contrasting dynamics of their home life and school environment, the existence of a generally accepting multicultural society alongside a growing wave of Islamophobia and racism. These contexts have the potential to disrupt, fragment, and hinder the development of a strong and sustainable identity for CMY. Nevertheless, CMY, as a whole, manage to forge such an identity. They accomplish this by drawing upon the narrative resources provided by their families, communities, and religion. Additionally, they counteract negative narratives and experiences that threaten to undermine their sense of self by asserting alternative stories, challenging assumptions with the declaration, "I am not who you think I am."

The participants emphasized the importance of intervention programs that address religious and cultural aspects for young Muslims. They recommended using creative approaches and combining evidence-based practices with Islamic spirituality to promote the mental health and overall well-being of Muslim youth. Policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders have a crucial role to play in collaborating to develop such initiatives for the positive development of young people.

Findings from phase 1 of this study will be used to facilitate discussions with religious leaders and Muslim scholars to share their views on the identity issues of CMY in the context of religion, spirituality, gender, race, nationalism, citizenship, and global conflicts. Based on the insights gained from phase 1, the interviews with the community leaders and Islamic scholars in phase 2 of the research project will contribute to the public discourse and policymaking to address the pressing issue of Islamophobia. Consequently, it is crucial for social work practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to take into account the aforementioned socio-political and religious dimensions when designing, implementing, and evaluating youth programs targeted at Muslim communities.

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