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"I Am Not Who You Think I Am": Multiple, Hybrid and Racialized Identities of Canadian Muslim Youth in the Negotiation of Belonging and Citizenship

AAMIR JAMAL, CLIVE BALDWIN, WASIF ALI and SWATI DHINGRA

Abstract

While other studies explore the challenges faced by Western Muslim youth, this study focuses on the challenges and development of a meaningful stable Canadian-Muslim identity in an era of global conflicts, collective surveillance, and suspicion. Identity-formation is complex, involving the configuration of many influences—direct and indirect, local and global, personal and impersonal. Sometimes aspects of fluid, and multiple identities conflict and individuals are faced with navigating competing and not necessarily commensurable influences. Such is the case with the Canadian Muslim Youth—CMY. Thematic analysis of 30 interviews with CMY, identified five major themes: (a) Navigation of multiple, complex, and hybrid identities; (b) Religious identity and spirituality; (c) "I am not what you think I am"—Media portrayals of Muslims; (d) Claiming inclusion and belonging in the face of anti-Muslim racism; and (e) Recommendations. Listening to CMY voices will help policymakers, practitioners, Muslim communities and organizations to develop strategies for positive youth development.

Keywords: *Muslim; youth; identity; global conflicts; collective surveillance*

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1. Introduction

The identity formation of Muslims and their belongingness in Western societies has been a long-standing contentious concept in the literature. The Canadian context differs from that of the US and other Western nations due to historical, political, and global policies. Within the context of the progressive multiculturalism policies in Canada wherein immigrants are not required to assimilate and leave their ethnic, religious, and cultural identities, this intersection of identity formation and religious affiliation of Muslims is remarkable. Belonging to diverse ethnic backgrounds and speaking different languages, the Muslim population of Canada is 1m+ people, having almost doubled in number in each of the past three decades. Canadian Muslims also represent the youngest Canadian population with a median age of 28.9 years, 86% of Canadian Muslims live in the larger metropolitan areas of Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, and Ottawa.[1] Muslim youth face multiple challenges in developing meaningful and stable identities. Continued wars and conflicts in the Muslim world, tensions between traditional values and 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. These tensions are heightened even further in the context of religion and global conflicts.[2] While there are studies exploring issues and challenges faced by Muslim youth,[3] here we seek to understand the wider context of such issues, through exploring factors that contribute to, and hinder, the development of a meaningful and stable Canadian Muslim identity in an era of global conflicts, collective surveillance, and suspicion. Therefore, this study explores how identity is constructed among Canadian Muslim Youth (CMY) and examines multiple theoretical understandings of how identities are negotiated and transformed within larger and conflicting (or contested) religio-political and cultural contexts.

Kriesberg[4] explains that individual identities are multifaceted and comprise different contexts. A person embodies multiple identities, including nationality, religion, ethnicity, profession, and family with identity being not just an individual but also a collective construct, both being constructed in relation to others, this being important to study in the case of Muslims living in Canada. Another important phenomenon associated with this concept is identity conflict, which occurs when two different aspects of identity are exclusive but in conflict with each other. Lederach[5] revealed that all conflicts are identity conflicts, which result from the interactive process and shared meaning around the social construction of identity**.** With Lifton,[6] we see identity as not a constant phenomenon but fluid, dynamic, and changeable according to context and exposure, that is, a protean one as individuals navigate Bamberg's[7] three dilemmatic spaces of continuity and change, similarity and difference, and agency and non-agency.

While there has been growing interest in understanding the challenges and issues faced by CMY in the process of identity construction, little has been written about these issues. Several studies have targeted particular issues such as education and schooling,[8] political engagement,[9] or the effectiveness of multiculturalism[10] while others address identity only tangentially to other research interests.[11] Little is known about the construction of multiple identities or the dialogical construction of identity as these pertain to the wider and diverse Muslim community's perspective on youth identity.[12] In contemporary Canadian culture, Muslim youth must negotiate and create their own identity, within the context of what it means to be Canadian and Muslim simultaneously.[13] Tensions

within the Canadian polity, between Canadian polity and the Muslim tradition,[14] and within the Muslim community itself create challenges for the construction of a meaningful and stable identity among CMY.

2. 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 and this is augmented by their experiences of some form of Islamophobia.[15] Islamophobia as part of public discourse on religion and immigration in Canada has been mentioned in various studies. The presence and serious impact of the Islamophobic sentiments in a Western pluralist society[16] and places such as schools have also been discussed.[17] 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, an important finding being that Muslim students felt pressurized to represent Islam or defend their religion in classrooms. Amjad, exploring the experiences of Muslim students from an elementary school in Alberta, revealed widespread negative views about Muslims in Canadian schools.[18]

Islamophobic and anti-Muslim experiences have also been linked more to hijab-wearing women.[19] In Tiflati's study,[20] female participants reported that they felt personally attacked in their identities when their hijabs became publicized and politicized during public debates about ostensible religious signs. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment of fear is stated not to result from isolation, but to be instilled with the fear of "other" which includes the stereotypes and parodies attached to other migrant groups in Western societies.[21] Intensification of Islamophobia has been linked to media propagating stereotypes and contributing to a negative understanding of Islam in the Western world.

A perceived relationship between Islam and terrorism has been attributed as the most pressing challenge leading to the feeling of "otherness" amongst the Muslim youth in the west.[22] According to the Environics Institute,[23] Muslims in the west particularly have been regarded as the "poorly understood" minority religious group with a generalized feeling of heightened anxiety with the underlying belief of implicit biases against Muslims has been reported.[24] 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." These concerns were validated by a 2017 Angus Reid survey that found only 33% of Canadians had favorable 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.[25]

The contemporary situation and experiences of Muslims in Western society has also led to the use of the term "suspect community by some researchers[26] and is suggested to have a direct link with the war on terror.[27] The association between violent extremism and terrorism committed[28] in the name of Islam has led to the negative portrayal of Muslims in the broader Western societies.[29] This situation of stigmatization and bias has also been noted within the Canadian context. Findings from the Environics Institute, reveal that the sense of belonging to Canada was very strong among Canadian Muslims though many youths (approximately 83%) still continue to fear discrimination and racism.[30] Serious issues of discrimination, prejudice, and Islamophobia have been

reported by young Muslims. An upsurge in global tensions pertaining to Islam and Muslims in the West has led to the political culture of fear and insecurity among Canadian Muslims. These discourses have also conditioned a climate of social exclusion and hostility that has found expression in both the broader culture and institutional practices across Canada.[31]

3. Objectives

Our research aims to fill and narrow the gaps in the literature by addressing the following questions:

(1) What are the existing identities of CMY (aged 18–30, Statistics Canada's definition of youth)?
(2) How do CMY construct, negotiate and maintain their individual, communal, religious and transnational identities?
(3) What factors (e.g. gender, religion, education, family background, experiences of discrimination) impact identity development amongst CMY?

4. Methodology and field work

The insights of this paper derive from 30 in-depth interviews with Muslim youth from three Canadian metropolitan cities. Participants were identified through social networks, mosques, community organizations, schools, and universities in Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver, with 10 participants from each location. All interviews were conducted in English. Convenience and snowball strategies of data collection were applied with attention to maximum variation strategy to gain a diverse religious and ethnic perspective. In all, we interviewed 18 males and 12 females between the ages of 18 and 30, belonging to a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and coming from various countries of origin including Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey.

Narrative inquiry, located within the constructionist framework, has developed as a means of exploring lived experience,[32] making sense,[33] communication, and the interplay of individual and social, cultural, and discoursal factors.[34] Narrative is a crucial constituent of the Self has been noted by many authors[35] and it is clear that we as humans make sense of ourselves and others through the stories we tell and the stories of which we are a part.[36] We conducted qualitative narrative interviews[37] to provide insight into the narrative identity of participants and how they understand their lives in their social, political, religious, and cultural narrative environments. This helped us understand the dialogical aspect of identity formation[38] from the diverse religious and ethnic perspectives of CMY.

Interviews consisted of open-ended questioning, allowing participants to continue telling their stories in directions beyond the confines of our interview schedule. We asked questions in various ways, seeking to understand participant backgrounds (birthplace, current residence, legal status, etc.) as well as current trajectories and future plans. Two researchers carried out the in-person and Zoom interviews lasting 45–60 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Before the interview, participants signed a consent form and verbal consent was confirmed at the start of each interview. An audit trail of questions, discussions, and interpretation of data along with codebook and naming conventions was established.[39] The team of three researchers coded each transcript and codes were compared to ensure inter-coding reliability.

This research study has been approved by the University of Calgary Research Ethics Board (REB 19-1207) and St Thomas University (REB 2021-03).

5. Findings

5.1. *Overview*

There was an overarching sentiment of respect for Canadian diversity and multiculturalism policies. All participants expressed their sense of agreement with the immigrant-friendly policies including equity and diversity approaches followed in the majority of the Canadian schools and universities. Although the study participants seemed satisfied with their social positions in the broader Canadian society, for the most part, there were elements of resentment, concerns and exasperation expressed also.

We discuss the experiences of Muslim youth and the process of their identity formation consolidated as five major themes (a) The journey of navigating multiple, complex, and hybrid identities; (b) Religious identity and spirituality; (c) "I am not what you think I am"—Media portrayals of Muslims; (d) Claiming inclusion and belonging in the face of anti-Muslim racism; and (e) Recommendations.

5.2. *Navigating Multiple, Complex, and Hybrid Identities*

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 background from a variety of countries with a large number of participants or their parents' nationalities from Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. Although the participants felt well 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. Participants appreciated the values of diversity and inclusion in Canadian society while stating their desire to maintain their Muslim identity within a diverse and multicultural Canada.

All 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 this:

> I think Canadians in general have really good values, especially Canadian citizens. 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.

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. Whereas the Canadian education system encourages diversity and inclusion and focuses on the foundation of a strong Canadian identity, some participants shared the concerns of their parents about losing their faith and cultural values in this 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. The following quote expresses, how a participant from Toronto who belongs to an immigrant family having moved to Canada 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. Obviously, my parents obviously favor having Pakistani friends or Muslim friends. And I think that having Muslim friend is very important, you stay close to your roots.

Furthermore, participants acknowledged the influence of their religious and cultural values in shaping and regulating their social identity.

> I think it's more related to the Pakistani side of my identity because I've always associated a lot of the aspects of Islam with my Pakistani identity because they tend to kind of overlap and a lot of, for example, the cultural perceptions of things are shaped by Islamic perceptions of things which become my Muslim identity.

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 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. Me choosing not to associate strongly with Pakistani and Muslim friends before to now me only having Pakistani and Muslim friends. I think I just connect more strongly with my Muslim friends. (C8)

5.3. *Religious Identity and Spirituality*

A predominant sense of religious identity was noted by the majority of those who, when self-identifying or beginning to share their reflections on their identity, almost always

referred to their religious roots and connections. They indicated their affiliation to Islamic values and teachings as guideposts throughout their life experiences. It has been observed that religious and spiritual attachment played a role during the turning points in participants' lives.

Participants asserted their belief in Islamic teachings and practices that helped them in 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. All 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:

> It's helped me a lot because a lot of people are like if you're non -religious 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.

A majority of 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 ethnic and cultural background from Indonesia 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 prayer room. Growing up I have taken so much from the community like 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 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 since Canadian education is much more accommodating to other visible groups such as First Nations and Black communities. A female university student from Toronto, who was born in Canada explained:

> I guess the other challenges for like the Muslim youth that are being taught certain things at home. But then when they go to school or university or the workplace. There's like 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.

5.4. "*I Am Not What You Think I Am*"—*Media Portrayals of Muslims*

The media was viewed as being a prominent factor in the process of identity formation and representation of Muslims in the Western as well as the broader international context. There was consensus regarding the negative portrayal of Muslims as well as Islam as a religion in a 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 Muhammed 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 but our people …

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.

However, this unjust association of Muslims to any acts of hostility around the globe was concerning, a concern amplified by the labeling of all such incidents as acts of terrorism by Muslims. A female participant from Calgary was worried about the role of 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 labeled 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-happening as depicted in media was an outstanding concern for 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 that 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 interpretation of religion, believing the 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 thinks deviant and psychologically ill people are damaging the real message of religion and serving the cause of others. A university student from Toronto expressed:

> Its 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 want to harm people. It has nothing to do with religion.

5.5. *Claiming Inclusion and Belonging*

Although participants indicated satisfaction with the most part of Canadian society, they still reported instances of racism and discrimination when asked. 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 scrutinization 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.

Study participants asserted a sentimental affection for their religious clothing and dressing. According to some of the participants, wearing a Muslim hat or hijab, or dressing in a traditional Muslim way strongly connected them to their religion, making it easier for them to explain their religious values to their non-Muslim Canadian counterparts. Participants also shared that their religious clothing was a way to make visible their religious values and practices to their own selves and keep a check on their actions from the Islamic point of view. A second- generation young Canadian with a family background from Indonesia said:

> 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 were 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.

5.6. *Supporting Positive Youth Development*

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 for inviting more youth to the mosques and promote religious education for Muslim youth. 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 to understand their religion more comprehensively and mosques 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 strengthening the religious knowledge and awareness among the Muslim youth. A male participant from Calgary explained:

> 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. Understand that the roots of why things are happening, where these ideas are coming from help 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 Western community. One notable suggestion was that government could play a role in regulating the media to improve the position of Muslims in Canadian society. 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 some 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 provided the following:

> 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.

6. Discussion

As an overarching objective of this study, we aimed to explore how CMY negotiate their identities as Muslims and as Canadians in the context of global conflicts. Our data revealed the process of identity formation for these youth to be complex involving a number of factors that influence their identity construction.[40] Similar complexities and changing relationships of the Muslim youth with their religion have been mentioned by McGrath and McGarry.[41]

It is clear from the data that CMY are faced with the navigation of their identities through multiple narrative environments—that is, through internalizing, accommodat-

ing, remediating, adapting, rejecting (and so on) the stories that circulate in the wider circles of community and society that act so as to shape possible and potential identities. CMY live within the overlapping narrative environments of home-then and home-now, family, religious and social communities, officially sanctioned and supportive multi-cultural policies, increasing secularization, and Islamophobia.

For the most part, CMY participants in our study were satisfied with the Canadian policies promoting multiculturalism and diversity. Besides their experiences of racism and discrimination, most participants expressed appreciation and belongingness to the Canadian culture. While they still felt connected to their grassroots through the religious and community connections, the study participants expressed their sense of belonging as being Canadian.

Religion was reported as the most significant factor influencing identity construction. The majority of participants appreciated Islamic values and regarded their religion as a guiding factor in shaping their overall identity, personality, as well as their moral character. Many participants shared incidents from their life stories describing the supportive role of religion in their psychological and mental well-being during difficult times. Participants also referred to the influence of religious education at home and through their engagement in the Muslim communities as a critical factor in their identity development. The importance of religion and religious education both from family and community has been mentioned as imperative in transforming Muslim youth's identity in the Western countries. Adaptations of Muslim youth and children to the Canadian and broader Western context while still maintaining their religious beliefs and practices have been discussed by many authors[42] though the issue of being religious in an increasingly secular world has not.

The development of a stronger religious identity being a Muslim was reported by the participants. Participants reported a generalized feeling of weaker ethnic identities while living in Canada. Contrary to their upbringing and lifestyle back home in Muslim majority countries, practicing of their specific ethnic and cultural norms was recognized as a challenging aspect for CMY. For young Muslims in Western societies, religious identity is marked by heterogeneity and conflicting perspectives when compared with the practices and norms in the Muslim predominant countries, often times referred to as homelands. This perspective is more pronounced in context of the young Muslim women.[43] We found similar patterns of manifoldness of religious identity among female participants in our study. Besides, we also noticed the differential perception of Islam as a religion when compared to the concept of religion in their native countries. Some study participants mentioned a feeling of disconnection with their religious identity during the early years of life in Canada mostly during their high school, this being followed by a period of reconnection with the religious aspect of their identity as they grew older. This could be attributed to refinement in their knowledge about their own religion and establishing a stronger relationship with their religion and cultural backgrounds at a relatively mature stage of their lives—a restoration or re-balancing of a sense of self following the biographical disruption prompted by their early years in Canada.

Unlike the struggles of young Muslims and other religio-cultural minorities in different Western counterparts around the world,[44] the Canadian Muslims in our study were very contented with the Canadian system of education and appreciated the opportunities for their professional and career advancements through Canadian institutions. As discussed in the literature,[45] the role of media[46] in negatively influencing and impacting the identity development of Muslim youth was revealed in our data. Although the presence of media

stereotypes[47] is not a common trend in the Canadian society, experiences from some of our study participants point towards the not-so-evident yet existing impact of media on Muslim youth and their overall representation within the broader Western society. Similar findings of increased Islamophobia related to media stereotypes in Canadian society have been reported by Kanji.[48]

Similar to experiences of discrimination reported in other studies[49] some participants shared experiences of racism and discrimination within Canadian society. According to some, the feeling of "otherness' was heightened with increased security and surveillance for Muslims[50] at airports following 9/11. Studies in the literature report similarly.

Findings point to the recent upsurge in Islamophobia[51] which is a growing concern in Western societies including Canada.[52] When we enquired about some recommendations on how to address this issue, our study participants shared suggestions for both Muslim communities in Canada and the Canadian government, with some novel ideas to better engage the Muslim youth with their communities and promote activities to establish connections among the youth in the community. Many participants suggested that mosques should serve as community institutions for engaging youth instead of just being religious or worship places. For positive youth development, mosques should initiate societies and clubs for Muslim youth to engage them in social activities like sports, welfare, and human services work.

Finally, the participants suggested increased awareness about their religion and taking collective steps to improve the worldview of Islam and Muslims. Some recommendations indicated the important role of government in shaping the representation of Muslims in the Western community. Notable suggestions to curb the negative portrayal of Muslims in media were suggested by participants.

7. Strengths and limitations

This study is based on good sample size for qualitative research, having interviewed 30 Muslim youth from three major metropolitan cities of Canada, representing a variegated sample of male and female participants from multiple ethno-cultural backgrounds. We used a rigorous methodological approach to thematically analyze and synthesize our study findings in a robust manner. With the present study being led primarily by Muslim researchers having deeply rooted connections within the community, the insider status of researchers helped gain confidence and acceptance among the study participants thus allowing them to share their views and opinions in a more free and flexible manner.

However, we consider under-representation of the CMY from Quebec cities with relatively large Muslim populations, as a limitation. Participants were recruited from Muslim community organizations and networks; we predict a possibility that our study participants who were already aligned with these networks might have not faced the intensity of youth identity issues because of their established connections with the community. Recruitment of study participants through religious organizations and networks might have limited the selection of participants to only the youth who are more engaged with these associations adding as a limitation to this study.

8. Implications and concluding remarks

This work contributes to the scholarly work and existing literature on the Muslim youth in Western countries and will also support developing a better understanding of the

concept of Islamophobia in Western societies besides providing an additional lens to address this issue within the Canadian context. Understanding Muslim youth identity formation from the perspective of youth themselves has brought forward their opinions on Islam as a religion and their perceptions about the Islamic teachings and Islamic way of life. This will help the Muslim communities and organizations to develop strategies for positive youth development keeping in view these shared experiences and perceptions. Overall, this study will contribute to the public discourse and policymaking to address the pressing issue of Islamophobia by supporting CMY, reiterating the need for pluralism in Canadian society.

This study also contributes to an understanding of the role of narrative in the formation and maintenance of a viable, coherent identity within a not-wholly-supportive narrative environment. CMY are faced with navigating multiple narrative contexts—those of "home-ten" and "home now", home life and school, a generally sympathetic official multi-culturalism and a rising strand of Islamophobia and racism—contexts that have the potential to disrupt, fragment, and hinder the development of a viable and sustainable identity. Yet, CMY do, on the whole, manage to develop such an identity. They do this both by drawing on the narrative resources of their family, communities, and religion and by counter-storying ("I am not who you think I am") tropes and experiences that threaten to damage their identity. Although experiencing Canada as a generally supportive society, it is interesting to note that participants viewed the extension of a Muslim narrative environment through awareness of Islam, programs, and incentives for attendance at mosques, and engagement in the Muslim community as important factors moving forward. While deep analysis of interview data around these issues must wait, the analysis so far suggests that the examination of the stories of CMY has much to contribute to our understanding of the current workings of multicultural Canada and the inclusion of those stories in the development of youth strategies and governmental policies will further the goals of Canadian society.

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