



'We are always changing, that's a good thing': A qualitative exploration into the identity of young Muslims.

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### ABSTRACT

Despite Islam being the fastest growing religion in the UK, there is limited research conducted on the lived experiences of young Muslims. This study explores the personal experiences of young Muslim individuals with an aim to understand the contributing factors to their respective identities and how they deal with this in their day-to-day life, within their personal, social and professional growth, beyond existing literature. Six participants were involved in semi-structured interviews, producing qualitative data. Use of thematic analysis methodology uncovered common themes amongst the interviews; these are: 'religion', 'belongingness' and 'societal expectations', each with their respective subthemes. Although there were minor differences between participants' experiences, the overarching thoughts and understandings emerging from the data provide an overview of related factors, particularly maintaining one's faith, finding safe spaces, and upholding a level of fluidity within our sense of self. Based on the findings of this study, a preliminary understanding of navigating identity in today's society is presented and discussed, using existing literature around the subject. By incorporating these findings, academic staff, employers, and wellbeing services can provide effective and holistic strategies for young Muslims to find their place in the world.

KEY WORDS:	IDENTITY	ISLAM	BELONGINGNESS	SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS	SAFE SPACES
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## Introduction

It is undoubtedly clear that the Muslim population of the UK are one of the most marginalized in the country, although they are the second largest faith demographic (ONS, 2018). For today's young Muslims, it can be difficult navigating one's faith at such a crucial identity-cementing time. Targeted hatred against Muslims is not a new phenomenon, but data shows that it has been on the rise since significant events in history such as the 9/11 attack (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017), and the Manchester bombing (May 2017). As a result, the Muslim community has been ascribed negative associations, including acts of violence and terror, and Islam has been considered antithetical to Western values. Such perspectives frequently found in media coverage of Muslims are highlighted by the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy, which emphasizes the importance of assimilation to British values (DfE, 2014), resulting in a sense of alienation for Muslims (Phoenix, 2017). It is vital to understand the negative perceptions of Muslims that are a result of these policies and media exposure, and how these intertwine with growing up and forming a personal identity from the perspective of Muslim individuals themselves. However, within psychological literature, this particular group appears to be disregarded by researchers, with many of the unique experiences of young Muslims being undocumented.

## Identity

Our sense of self is at the centre of our social world, responsible for organizing our thoughts, feelings and actions (Myers, 2007). Junglas et al. (2007) proposed a framework regarding the development of self-concept, suggesting that identity formation includes two processes, exploration and commitment. According to Junglas et al. (2007), exploration is the time period where an individual starts to question and investigate their beliefs, goals, and commitment. There are many factors contributing to the development of our sense of self, including culture, upbringing, beliefs and values, and past experiences (Hoque, 2018); each of these play a significant role in shaping the way individuals think about themselves and identify themselves to other.

Further research into this area has led to psychosocial theories such as Erikson's domains of identity (1968), which proposes that individual's need to overcome certain stages of development to maintain their identity. Stages five and six relate to the current study respectively. Stage (Identity vs Role Confusion) includes late adolescence and focuses on social relationships. It suggests that attainment in developing one's sense of self and individual identity leads to an ability to stay true to oneself and failure to do this can result in role confusion, referring to future careers. Stage six, Intimacy vs Isolation, follows those aged 19-40 years and stresses the importance of relationships. According to this, young adults must form intimate, caring relationships with other people to prevent loneliness and isolation (Erikson, 1968).

Islam, in particular, can be described as submission to the will of God and a Muslim is one who submits their mind, body, and soul to the will of God (Abu-Raiya, 2008). Studies by Youniss et al. (1999) have highlighted the importance of religion in identity formation, with one of the main findings being that youth who view religion as important in their lives have a higher likelihood to be involved with volunteer service,

as well as being more engaged in their education and the improvement of their communities which identities foreshadow a wholesome life. Within religion, this is an extremely multi-dimensional area (Youniss et al., 1999), however it is clear it has been neglected in the concept of identity development within psychology.

### **Discrimination**

The framing of Muslims in multiple forms of discourse has influenced the way Muslims develop their identities (Phoenix, 2017), specifically in relation to exclusion and increasing hostility (McKenna and Francis, 2018). Consequently, this gives Muslim people the drive to seek solace in their religious identity (McKenna and Francis, 2018), aligning with the argument that the emotional mechanisms of individuals' constructions of themselves and their identities become more dominant, the less secure they feel (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Hager (2012) poses the question of what happens when the period of identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood intersects with a cultural period in which the wider society begins to view certain individuals or groups as dangerous. Emergent adulthood is given to the period of time between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Arnett argues that this demographic is one that struggles with 'identity exploration, instability, and feeling in-between (Marantz-Henig, 2010), therefore it is not unusual for an individual to seek solace in their religion identity. Religious identity is subjective but can be considered to be the way an individual relates to a transcendent being and to a sociocultural group which is principally characterized by the transcendent being (Bell, 2009).

### **Group membership**

Identifying with different groups can offer benefits to our wellbeing, for example a sense of belonging and enhanced support (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haslam et al, 2009). Membership to a group, such as a religion or social group, can also help individuals to fulfil goals they may have been unable to attain otherwise (Haslam et al., 2009). It is natural to make the assumption that religious affiliation can serve a powerful ingredient in shaping one's social identity. However, there is little research that shows the different strands of this. Considering the significance of faith in one's self-concept (Freeman, 2003) alongside a common culture wherein certain communities are targeted due to their affiliation with religion, it is vital to explore the ways in which religion can shape who we are, how we describe ourselves and how this can be rooted in our beings, from a psychosocial perspective.

### **Rationale**

However, the literature described above only considers primary stages of development: young children and adolescents, overlooking young adulthood, which emerging adults.

As described, prevailing evidence exists to exhibit some of the differing intersections within identity and subjects such as race (Branscombe et al., 1999) and gender (Schmitt et al., 2003), however, the gap in the research field is focussing on religion, in particular young Muslims exclusively, as the bulk of research principally focuses on non-Muslim communities and employs quantitative methods.

As stated by Oppong (2013), although there is limited evidence regarding the relationship between identity and religion, studies have shown a positive one, with religiosity being found to have an important and present role in ones' identity formation. Furthermore, according to Ali (2014:1) a component of academic research claims that Muslims in Britain 'are withdrawn from mainstream Britain' residing in 'segregated ethnic enclaves' and categorise themselves in 'religiously homogenous networks'. Similar to Ali (2014), this research endeavours to venture beyond these prerogatives to advance the understanding of identities of young Muslims. With much religious identity research being described as inconclusive (Bradford, 2009) it is fundamental that independent researchers probe within different cultural populations for a broader stance on the subject, beyond existing research.

### **Aim**

- To explore the experiences of young Muslims, in relation to how they form and manage their identity.

### **Research questions**

- How do young Muslim individuals describe their journeys in navigating their identities within today's society?
- How do young Muslims' experiences in their personal, social and professional lives influence the way they present and express themselves?
- In what way do young Muslims believe their surroundings influence their identity creation?

### **Methodology**

#### **Design**

A thematic analytic approach was implemented for this study. Given the nature of the research aims, this was a more appropriate method in being able to recognize individuals' subjective thoughts and feelings around their identity creation as a young Muslim as qualitative research allows for a higher degree of flexibility and openness (Maxwell, 2012), which is considered a key instrument for exploring complex issues related to identity.

#### **Participants**

Participants were recruited using a volunteer sampling method via the researcher's own social media. This method allowed the researcher to find individuals who would be interested in sharing their views and experiences for the study. Individuals who met the following inclusion criteria were invited to participate; (a) identified as Muslim, b (b) were aged 18-25. This was considered a fitting demographic to allow adequate reflection of their experiences on the subject matter, as much research regarding Muslims has often focused on children and adolescents (Suleiman, 2017; Hutnik and Street, 2010), lacking the experiences of a group known as 'emerging adults. This is defined as a period where individuals engage in an extended phase of identity development, alongside the duality of having both freedom and adult

responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). The researcher limited the number of participants to 6 (figure 1) to offer sufficient data, as recommended by Baker and Edwards (2012).

According to Morrow (2005), the role of the researcher, who is involved with collecting, transcribing and analyzing all data, is an important factor to acknowledge as it will influence the interpretations constructed from the data. As the researcher fits both demographics examined in the current study, it can be argued that this allows for a better understanding and sensitivity to the themes discussed by the participants. Before the interview took place, participants were given an information sheet (Appendix 2) and a consent form (Appendix 3) which was signed by both the participant and researcher. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

**Table 1**  
**Demographics of participants**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
<b>Maryam</b>	19	Eritrean
<b>Halima</b>	20	Somali
<b>Noor</b>	22	Pakistani
<b>Adan</b>	18	Somali
<b>Liban</b>	18	Somali
<b>Mohamed</b>	24	Somali

### **Measures**

For this study, data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. This was employed to allow the researchers to keep the interview relevant whilst still being broad enough to elicit thorough responses about participants' experiences with creating and navigating their respective identities (Hutchinson and Wilson, 1992), as well as allowing freedom around questions to cover areas not previously accounted for by the researcher (Sullivan et al, 2012). The interviews were guided by an interview schedule (Appendix 5). This consisted of comprehensive, open-ended questions to permit participants to liberally communicate previous experiences in their own words (Sullivan et al, 2012). The interview questions were proposed on the basis of their ability to encourage discussion of individuals' life experiences with their religious beliefs and identity navigation and probe meaningful areas within these, such as social life, and relationships with family and friends around them (Maxwell, 2012). Examples of such questions include 'What part of your identity did you struggle the most with growing up?' and 'Do you think your social group(s) impact(s) who you are?'. Based on the participants' responses, clarifications and additional prompts were used as necessary, to allow thorough exploration of their experiences. All interviews were approximately 30-40 minutes long and took place either on the university campus or in a quiet and safe environment. A smartphone was used to record the interviews and then transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

To assess the aims of the study, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis; this involves identifying, dissecting and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The ‘theoretical freedom’ of this method allowed attainment of rich, in-depth views from participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006:79). After interview-transcription, the interviews were analyzed line-by-line (see Appendix 7 for a sample), allowing the researcher to observe patterns and implicit meanings within them. Initial codes were distinguished from the data using an axial coding method, whereby line-by-line codes were expanded into broader categories to produce themes. As this went on, common themes across each of the transcripts began to emerge. Finally, homogenous themes were developed through further analysis of narratives, and compared across the interview responses.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study was carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines set down by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018) and approval was attained from Manchester Metropolitan University’s (MMU) Psychology Department (Appendix 1). Pre-interview, the participants were given an information sheet (Appendix 2) detailing what the study required of them. They also received a consent form (Appendix 3) requesting their agreement for participation in the study, which explained that data from their interviews would be kept anonymous and would be encrypted on a password-protected device, and that any quotes used within the report would be referenced to a pseudonym. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw or decline any questions they did not want to answer. A number of the questions were intended to inspire discussion of topics which may be considered culturally-sensitive, however, flexibility was given to them in terms of the way they chose to answer such. Participants were fully-debriefed after interview participation and provided with contact details for any questions or concerns, and access to relevant counselling and support bodies if needed (Appendix 4). Identifying data was removed from transcripts to protect anonymity.

### **Analysis**

The study intended to highlight some of the issues surrounding identity of young Muslims. Following thematic analysis, a number of codes were discovered in each transcript; those that were considered similar in their nature were merged, producing clear themes and subthemes.

The dominating theme was ‘Connection with Religion’, including subthemes ‘religious practices’, ‘family and peer relationships’ and ‘morality’. Theme 2, ‘Societal Expectations’ and contained ‘microaggressions’, ‘discrimination’ and ‘identity fluidity’. Theme 3 was ‘Belongingness’, consisting of subthemes ‘social groups and ‘safe spaces’.

#### **Theme 1: Connection with Religion**

Religion emerged as a predominant theme which appeared profoundly in the interviews. This included subthemes of ‘religious practice’, ‘family and peer relationships’ and ‘morality’. Thus, it was indicative that this was an enriching and

prominent aspect of the participants' identities, in both obvious and subtle ways as highlighted.

### **Religious practice**

Firstly, practicing one's religion gave participants a foundation to base their identity upon.

'I begin my day in the name of God and end my day in the name of God.'  
(Noor, line 20).

'Practicing like by praying or reading Qur'an allows me to remember God and establish that consciousness of my faith and of God.' (Maryam, lines 186-187).

Both Halima and Maryam agree that Islam underlies their daily lives and routines and gives them the incentive to keep striving, even beyond their character. Liban and Halima give harmonizing responses, bringing to light their belief that Islam lies in the core being.

'My religion, being Muslim, is something I know I can always fall back on...I could strip back everything and I'm still a Muslim.' (Liban, line 38).

'It provides me with a bigger purpose and is the motivation and drive behind most things in my life.' (Halima, line 26).

In the context of religion, practice denotes to the level that people participate in conventional religious rituals, such as fasting, or prayer (Aziz, 2010), as exhibited above. Adan (line 32) mentions 'attending Islamic classes, praying 5 times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan' as common practices he takes part in.

The aforementioned actions include physical behaviours that are exhibited on a regular basis, showing the participants' dedication and time commitment to their religious rituals, which is one way of signifying identity (Longest, 2009). This practice, whilst pulling participants closer to God, gives them a framework for their identity; participants feel a sense of purpose in life which defines their core identity 'without religion, I don't think my life would have much meaning to it' (Halima, line 28).

A principal connection which unites Maryam and Halima is the idea that religion gives them the underpinning from which they base who they are and how they define their sense of self.

'I never had a period of questioning my faith. It's a huge part of my identity.'  
(Maryam, line 22)

'Islam...it's the truth.' (Halima, line 32)

Many Muslim women also practice their religion by choosing to wear hijab. Halima says, 'by displaying my religion through my hijab, I'm openly expressing my spiritual beliefs and therefore, who I am' (line 53) as she discusses how much of her identity comes from 'embodying Islam's values'. This examples Junglas et al.'s (2007)



commitment process in identity formation as Halima has chosen to devote herself to the religion through the hijab.

It is also clear from the transcript that this helps participants feel like they are part of their community (Honohan and Rouqier, 2011), as Maryam also talks of ‘feeling like I am part of a group – hijabis. We recognize one another through our commitment to covering our hair and dressing modestly.’ (lines 48-49).

Openly performing social identity allows group members to consolidate their membership to a group, which in this case is adopting hijab (Klein et al., 2007).

### **Family and peer relationships**

The participants each detailed their involvement of faith and practice within their own homes. Open communication with family is vital for religious identity formation (Chaudhury and Miller, 2007).

In particular, this research highlights the importance of open conversations with loved ones, to discuss their apprehensions and share new knowledge, to allow them to develop their personal beliefs. Maryam expresses,

‘My parents were always teaching me about Islam when I was younger and they do the same now, we regularly talk about things going on in our lives and look at them from an Islamic perspective...like the Prophet’s teachings and Sunnah and stuff’. (Maryam, lines 76-78)

Adan has a similar experience, as he said, ‘my brothers and I go to Islamic lectures and events together’ (line 65). The presence of religion in their lives is emphasized by Mohamed, ‘if my parents weren’t so consistent with teaching me about Islam, I don’t think my faith would have been so instilled into me...such a big part of my identity.’ (lines 93-94).

Parents shaping religious tendencies is significant in identity formation (Tannenbaum, 2009) and families may often engage in activities stimulating spiritual development, for example, performing charity for others and engaging in devotions at home (Aziz, 2010): ‘Ramadan nights as a child was such a big, exciting thing for me and my siblings’ (Mohamed, line 101). This helps us feel closer to our loved ones with who a lot of our time is spent with, again relating to the idea of a foundation.

Furthermore, according to Longest (2009) peer commitment did not influence religious salience amongst younger adolescents. However, this study showed that within emerging adults, peer groups are a vital part in one’s religious identity, in line with Chaudhury and Miller’s (2007) findings.

‘Having Muslim friends is great...we remind each other to pray at uni and we pray together...it brings us close together and strengthens our faith too’ (Maryam, lines 35-36).

### **Morality**

Another subtheme amongst several participants was the idea of morality and good principles. Mohamed’s parents’ pragmatic outlook and approach to religious matters

allowed him a level of freedom to his practice of Islam in his own way. Nonetheless, the concept of morality was always emphasized to him and through this grew his perseverance to practicing the religion and his striving to improve his character – another important part of his identity.

'It prevents me from carrying out acts I know are wrong, and provides me with guilt when I do, in hopes I don't make the same mistakes.' (Mohamed, lines 23-24).

Religious communities have the capacity to foster positive social and intergenerational relationships, consequently providing moral outcomes of empathy and altruism (Ebstyne and Furrow, 2004), which is evident within the transcripts as participants described having personality traits such as 'good morals' (Adan, line 22) and 'kindness' (Noor, line 26) as key parts of their identity.

Additionally, the responses outlined in the above section correspond to research which considers young adulthood a crucial time for individuals to reevaluate their faith, negotiate dependence on others and affiliate with communities to benefit them in their pursuit for meaning (Bryant, 2007).

## **Theme 2: Societal Expectations**

Another overarching theme discovered throughout the transcripts was 'societal expectations'. In terms of sub-themes, this included 'discrimination', 'microaggressions', and the concept of 'identity fluidity'.

### **Discrimination and Islamophobia**

Discrimination has frequently been observed to be a risk factor in healthy identity formation (Krieger et al., 1993). Following recent acts of terrorism which have been associated with Muslims, Muslim minorities have been subject to increasing levels of stereotypes and discrimination (Abbas, 2004).

Ruby (2006) highlights that the development of identity goes beyond how we presents ourselves to others, but also how others perceive us; in a Western society where hijab is seen in a negative light due to its association with Islam, and therefore terrorism (Haddad, 2007). This is displayed in the transcripts:

'There's a girl on my course who wears niqab, she's international from the UAE I think and I overheard a group of white girls saying why is she wearing that? She's not in ISIS...I told them she can wear what she wants, just like they can and it's none of their business' (Halima, lines 110-113).

This demonstrates the perception that Muslims dressed in Islamic clothing are terrorists, perhaps a sign of defying the unspoken laws of assimilation. It appears that individuals on society immediately put Muslims into and category of extremism, simply over their choice of dress.

Maryam has witnessed similar commentaries and makes remarks regarding her hijab being seen as a symbol of oppression (Phoenix, 2017):

'I've had people at work invite me to like drinks with them and been like "oh you can take your scarf off now, your parents won't find out" and "I feel so sorry for you" Why? I don't feel sorry for myself' (line 150-153).

For many Muslim women, the hijab or headscarf can become a position of struggle, particularly around the question of belonging, further leading to a difficulty in one's sense of self. Furthermore, Muslim women who practice hijab may face hostility from those who may perceived this to be a sign of oppression, or refusal to integrate (Phoenix, 2017). Despite these stereotypes, Liban maintains a 'strong British identity' (line 101) and Britain is considered home for all of the participants. Regardless, participants still felt like they were outcasts at times. There seems to be an underlying pressure to integrate to British values, due to 'a lack of religious understanding' (Mohamed, line 109).

'I never used to think about my identity, but I feel like in this day and age, it's always in the back of my mind. It's very heavy sometimes.' (Mohamed, lines 114-115)

'I've definitely internalized a lot of the things I am seeing and hearing'. (Noor, line 130)

As exhibited above, participants' explanations of their experiences with discrimination reference the problematic philosophies surrounding Islam in society, which inevitably lead to the internalization of Islamophobia. This is an area both understudied and underestimated (Suleiman, 2017). Internalized racism can be defined as the, often subconscious, acceptance of the dominant society's stereotypes of ones' own ethnic group (Suleiman, 2017). Studies on internalized oppression revealed the insecurities participants developed led them to attempt to foster dual personalities that help the integrate as efficiently as possible. This consequently results in confusion or in extreme cases, loss of identity, admits Adan:

'I've struggled with defining my identity at times...I feel like I'm still trying to find out who I am in terms of society.' (lines 73-74).

Maryam and Adan's frustrations also mimicked this, both using the terms 'guilt' (Maryam, line 109) and 'self-hate' (Adan, line 98) to describe emotions felt due to being 'constantly subjected to seeing and hearing discriminatory behaviour' (Adan, line 94) which led to ambiguity. Such religious stereotypes, discrimination and negative representation can have stigmatizing effects (Kunst et al., 2012).

However, similar to Mustafa and Javdani (2016), this study found that in some cases, discrimination can open up the door to opportunities to gain support from their own community, despite its negative impact. As previously-mentioned in this analysis, participants sought out safe spaces which 'really cemented my sense of self...gave me the confidence to be more unapologetic...take on activist roles which have made me much more self-aware' (Mohamed, line 143-148).

Noor discusses how being subject to discrimination and isolation as a result of her Muslim identity 'in a lecture theatre where I was the only Muslim, hijab-wearing girl'

(line 102) encouraged her to look for comfort in other areas, which opened her up to 'a portal of opportunities' (line 132).

### **Microaggressions**

All of the participants reported their experience with microaggressions and have been negatively stereotyped. Upon asking some of the questions, Halima reflected on their ethnic identity and contemplated how Islam made itself known in her identity. This became quite evident when she entered a space with new people. As Halima wears the hijab, it was of course visible that she was Muslim, and she has often been asked questions which insinuated she could be a spokesperson for all Muslims.

'I don't know everything, there is no reason to ask me all their burning questions when Google is free.' (line 86).

The level of frustration was emphasized within this sentence, and it was evident how Halima is sick of having to explain herself repeatedly in different contexts and be almost apologetic for her identity and how chooses to express this.

Similarly, Noor was very familiar with the concept of microaggressions, and has, over the years, learnt how to answer questions such as 'where are you really from?' (line 116). This reflects a level of ignorance, assuming that Noor is an immigrant in such an accusatory manner, making her feel alienated here. Liban elaborates on his British identity and how he has never considered himself different:

'I am undeniably and unapologetically British, as well as being black and Muslim and I think people are taken aback when they see that.' (line 124-125).

### **Identity fluidity**

Hoque (2018:185) describes postmodern religious identities complex, dynamic, and 'often contradictory, open to change'. This was apparent in the interviews; there seems to be a scale of fluidity within identity for these young Muslims, as a response to societal expectations. For example, for Maryam, it is quite difficult to define herself as she is used to giving a number of different responses depending on the context.

'I don't think anybody's identity is stable per se, but for Muslims I feel that because we are persecuting for so much, the way we describe our identity is constantly shifting to mix and match the environment we are in.' (Maryam, line 115-118).

It is clear that Adan agrees:

'I definitely feel like I'm in-between a lot of the time. Constantly reevaluating how I express myself, with my Muslim self, alongside like my cultural and traditional beliefs and then there's a British cultural identity too.' (lines 43-35).

Noor continues, 'a person's identity is very unique to them, I don't think anybody is stable, we are always changing, that's a good thing.' (lines 118-119). This narrative frames the idea of a fluid identity in a more positive way; highlighting how the

participant feels she has the opportunity to portray different aspects of her identity in different contexts, which all entwine to represent who she is. Both accounts seem to categorize them within the Identity vs Role Confusion stage on Erikson's domains of identity (Erikson, 1968), which may in turn lead to difficulty in choosing what direction to take careers-wise, and all participants are study at university.

### **Theme 3: Belongingness**

Belongingness was another core theme throughout the interviews, all participants were evidently aware of their 'otherness' (Mohamed) and expertly maneuvered this to support their identity. This theme encompassed subthemes of 'social groups' and 'safe spaces'.

#### **Social groups**

Upon asking the question 'What are some coping mechanisms you use to deal with stressors in your life?' (Appendix 5), Adan mentioned that he relied on his circle of friends when he felt lost. 'I feel comfortable when I am around them...I can actually be myself' (line 182) It appears that Adan associates his friends with a feeling of comfort, which in turn allows him to be at one with his identity. This fits in with the Intimacy vs Isolation stage whereby warm relationships with loved ones can prevent isolation (Erikson, 1968).

Hogg and Abrams (2003) state that identification with peers and group membership is vital to self-concept and self-esteem. Noor also talks about her peers and how they have been important in her personal identity development. Although peers can negatively affect an individual, whereby the perceived group norm incites engagement with harmful behaviours such as substance use (Ahmed et al, 2009), peer groups can also be a protective factor. 'My friends have definitely helped me stay grounded.' (Noor, line 175).

'We keep each other in check. When things aren't going right, we remind each other who we are. And when things are going well? We remind each other that that's us too' Affirms Mohamed (lines 168-169).

This highlights how the presence of positive peer groups can promote identity formation, through connectedness, support and shared experience (Zine, 2001).

Halima's experience mirrors this; a monthly film night at university allows her to express her identity of 'cultural and religious beliefs of being Somali, Black and Muslim' (line 189) because there, she has the opportunity to meet other students from similar demographics. Consequently, this enhances her self-esteem and sense of belongingness.

The presence of supportive peers serves to nurture positive attributes of an individual, promoting self-esteem, and as a result, allowing individuals to feel more confident and secure within themselves and their sense of self. Similarly, these types of trusting interactions are observed to foster identity development and self-worth (Cook, 2000).

#### **Safe spaces**

All the participants also referred to safe spaces as a coping mechanism in their lives, and Halima is not the only one who regularly attends her university's film night.

'When I got to a film night and we get to the discussion part, which happens afterwards, it feels so inclusive and I don't feel like I'm somebody different which I often do when I go to my lectures or other kind of uni events.' (Noor, lines 203-205).

Adan attends the same film nights, expressing how it gives him the confidence to express himself and share his perspective on topics that interest him. Disguised as a simple film night, for these participants, it is much more than that: an opportunity to vent in a constructive format, in a safe and supportive environment which encourages individuals to share pieces of themselves with each other and connect on a deeper level, without being invasive. Ysseldyk et al.'s (2010) research harmonizes that individual's feel like they belong when they can relate to members of a group and have a shared identity in these spaces.

'Being able to have conversations and like, not hold back, with people who get it too is so nice. It's just such a positive environment, I feel comfortable and uplifted.' (Adan, lines 202-203).

'I feel free from judgement, honestly it's made me feel much more secure in who I am...very unapologetic' (Noor, lines 207-208).

In a similar way, Maryam discusses how her university's prayer room has been a safe space for her, in line with literature that claims religious bodies can also deliver a safe environment to discuss and practice ones' beliefs, and eventually, construct a religious identity (Peek, 2005). Maryam explains how this provided her with an area where she felt 'connected' (line 24) not only to God via a personal connection, but to those who she shared religious beliefs with. This gave her the confidence to articulate and nurture her beliefs and was in fundamental part of figuring out her identity.

It is palpable how group membership with social groups and safe spaces are intertwined and result in a sense of belongingness and thus, comfortability with ones' identity. They provide an environment which allows formation of healthy and meaningful relationship with peers, that is accepting and welcome.

Feeling belongingness is a human need which every human desires (Mellor et al., 2008) and P3 talks about how a sense of belongingness made her more comfortable with her identity on the whole:

'...once I started to embody the fact that I have the right to be here as much as anybody else, I felt much more empowered as an individual.' (Noor, lines 124-125).

## Discussion

The themes identified in the study have demonstrated some of the experiences young Muslims have around their navigation and portrayal of their identities. The present study exhibits some of the highlights and difficulties experienced by young Muslims in constructing their identity and adapting this within different contexts they face in everyday life. Moreover, it identifies the different strategies participants use when defining who they are, such as adaptation, and the different intersections involved in this. It was evident throughout the data that participants valued religion as an anchor to their identity. It also argues the centrality of a belongingness in who we are, alongside the intricacies of society's discourse.

One conclusion that is so reoccurring that it is difficult to ignore is each participants' relationship with Islam. Regardless of their level of practice, each individual commented in some format that the religion provided them with an anchor; when they felt like they did not know who they were, or that they were losing themselves due to having to water themselves down or being fearful of expressing their identities, the religion always reminded them that they were never alone. Behaviour is an expression of identity according to Moran (2009) and from the bulk of data, is clear through religious practice and ideals how this is a big part of their identity amongst the participants involved.

The findings presented in the study may have practical implications by drawing attention to the importance of having safe spaces for young Muslims to have access to, in both educational and professional contexts. As they feel supported by their peers and ease the blow of personal challenges they may face when navigating their identity. This could certainly provide a better understanding for both academic staff, employers, and counselling and wellbeing specialists, as they are provided with an insight to assist them in providing adequate support to young Muslim individuals when working on their personal development.

Furthermore, an understanding allows young Muslims to sustain their identities alongside their religion. By enhancing their own wellbeing, they can improve their community's wellbeing as a whole, as highlighted by the relationship between religious involvement and drug and alcohol abuse (Abu-Raiya, 2008). Moreira-Almeida et al. (2006) highlights evidence that religious involvement has a positive correlation with indicators of healthy psychological wellbeing, including higher moral, life satisfaction, and happiness. Accordingly, this impacts on other aspects of their progression and maturation and will give them a safe space to feel valued and empowered with their existence, enriching not only themselves, but the greater good.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged regarding the study, such as the lack of heterogeneity of its sample; a diverse sample is essential in qualitative studies (Allmark, 2004). The majority of participants were from an East African background; therefore, it could be argued that these participants may have had different experiences to Muslims from different ethnicity backgrounds and cultures which address identity in distinctive ways. Consequently, it is difficult to generalise the results of this study beyond this sample.

Moreover, the lack of specificity in terms of identity resulted in a slight difficulty during analysis; at times this may seem too broad. The measures of this study should be

refined to produce more specific factors examined e.g. a specific part of identity or specific context with religious identity. Similarly, the use of general questions regarding religion and identity treats religious commitment as a unified object which may obscure some of its intricacies (Mohamed, 2011).

### **Future direction**

Whilst this study helped to address gaps within existing research, further questions can be presented based on the findings. Future research can seek to encourage further awareness of young Muslims by conducting semi-structured interviews with a broader range of individuals, for example, with different ethnic backgrounds to compare and contrast, as well as conducting a more thorough analysis with more themes from the transcripts. It would be instrumental to conduct a similar study on a longitudinal scale (Phoenix, 2017) in order to analyse the differing dimensions of individual experience over time, and through different life stages (Hoque, 2018), perhaps from adolescence through to adulthood.

### **Reflexive Analysis**

A fundamental aspect of qualitative methodology is the reflexivity, which enquires about the researcher's personal experiences, professional beliefs, and social position, to find a balance between the person and the universal, according to Berger (2013). This portion increases the credibility of research findings, by defining the researcher's core values, and biases (Cutcliffe, 2003).

I chose to take a personal reflective approach to the study (Willig, 2013), being a young Muslim myself. As a Muslim individual, I have recently been very interested in exploring how other Muslim individuals navigate their identity in the recent society which is saturated with hate and fear towards this demographic. I am also affected by the pressures presented in social, educational and professional environment which have shaped how I portray myself and wanted to investigate if other young Muslims have similar experiences.

Being a fellow Muslim gave me an advantageous position as an 'insider' almost, as I was able to better understand and represent young Muslim's experiences of forming their respective identities. Zempi (2016) suggests that this is particularly significant when researching groups that are socially-marginalized or underrepresented. However, it is also necessary to address that before drawing conclusions from the data, prior expectations and knowledges of the researcher may have influenced the participants. One suggestion to reduce this type of bias in qualitative research methodology is to ensure the design of the study allows for the incorporation of a wider range of perspectives in a more overt fashion, often referred to as 'fair-dealing' (Dingwall, 1992).

I was aware that as a researcher, it is important to pose the question of 'how much of your non-research self can be present without distorting the interview' (Glense and Peshkin, 1992:83). However, on reflection, I feel that by communicating my own experiences with my participants, I was able to build a rapport with them. This allowed a sense of trust between us, to enable them to feel more comfortable



sharing personal thoughts and anecdotes with myself (King and Horrock, 2010), thus delivering an insightful and potent perspective.

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