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Hussain Raissi and Mariska Kappmeier

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SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG MUSLIM YOUTH IN NEW ZEALAND: NAVIGATING DISCRIMINATION THROUGH REACTIVE RELIGIOSITY AND DISSIMULATION

Hussain Raissi* and Mariska Kappmeier**

Abstract: This study examines the sense of belonging and coping strategies of Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand in the context of perceived discrimination. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 Muslim youth aged 16 to 29, the study explores how participants navigate belonging to the Muslim community and wider New Zealand society. Analysed through frameworks of multiple belonging, reactive religiosity, and dissimulation, the findings reveal that the majority of participants maintain layered identifications, prioritising Muslim identity while expressing genuine attachment to New Zealand. However, discrimination, particularly targeting hijab-wearing women, threatens wellbeing by conveying rejection and exclusion, eroding the sense of safety and acceptance that belonging requires. In response, participants employ adaptive coping strategies: some strengthen their religious identity and community ties (reactive religiosity), which buffer against psychological harm through collective solidarity. Others conceal aspects of their identity in hostile contexts (dissimulation), which offers immediate protection but carries longer-term psychological costs, including diminished self-confidence, feelings of shame, and reduced capacity for authentic identity expression. These findings underscore the active, strategic responses (agency) of Muslim youth while highlighting the differential wellbeing implications of each coping strategy for inclusive policymaking.

Keywords: *sense of belonging, Muslim youth, discrimination, New Zealand, reactive religiosity, dissimulation, multiple belonging*

* Dr Hussain Raissi is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Otago in New Zealand, researching social connections, trust, and belonging among Muslim communities.

** Dr Mariska Kappmeier is a social psychologist in the Department of Psychology at the University of Otago in New Zealand. Her research focuses on intergroup trust, collective memories, and the relationships between institutions and diverse communities.

INTRODUCTION

The Christchurch mosque attacks of 15 March 2019 resulted in the deaths of 51 Muslim worshippers during Friday prayers.¹ The attack targeted Muslims engaged in their weekly congregational worship, representing one of the deadliest acts of terrorism in New Zealand's modern history.² The perpetrator was motivated by far-right, anti-Muslim ideology, explicitly targeting victims solely because of their religious identity.³ This tragedy occurred in a nation widely regarded as one of the world's most tolerant Western societies, where Muslims have peacefully co-existed for over 140 years.⁴ Yet the attack did not emerge from a vacuum; research had long documented a substantial "Muslim acceptance gap" in New Zealand, revealing that tolerance of Muslims lags behind acceptance of other minority groups.⁵ This pattern reflects a broader global trend, as prejudice against Muslims is prevalent across many Western countries.⁶ For Muslim communities, and particularly for young people navigating identity formation, such prejudice carries profound implications for their sense of belonging.

Muslim communities in New Zealand, particularly youth, face discrimination that can significantly affect their sense of belonging to broader society. Sense of belonging, a fundamental human need shaped by social acceptance and inclusion,⁷ is especially significant for young Muslim immigrants, who must navigate multiple identities while interacting with cultural norms and values that may differ from their heritage.⁸

While research has documented the relationship between perceived discrimination and group identification among immigrants, the literature reveals gaps and inconsistencies regarding how these processes operate across different socio-cultural contexts.⁹ In particular, limited research has been devoted to how Muslim immigrant youth actively cope with

¹ Lara M. Greaves et al., "Comparative Study of Attitudes to Religious Groups in New Zealand Reveals Muslim-Specific Prejudice," *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 15, no. 2 (2020): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2020.1733032>.

² David Bromell, "The Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques and the Christchurch Call," Working Paper 21/02 (Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 2021), 5; Danny Osborne et al., "White Nationalism and Multiculturalism Support: Investigating the Interactive Effects of White Identity and National Attachment on Support for Multiculturalism," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 62.

³ Diala Hawi et al., "Terrorism Anxiety and Attitudes toward Muslims," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 80; Colleen Ward et al., "A Critical Narrative Review of Research about the Experiences of Being Muslim in New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 44.

⁴ John H. Shaver et al., "News Exposure Predicts Anti-Muslim Prejudice," *PloS One* 12, no. 3 (2017): 2.

⁵ Greaves et al., "Comparative Study," 260; John H. Shaver et al., "Religion and the Unmaking of Prejudice toward Muslims: Evidence from a Large National Sample," *PloS One* 11, no. 3 (2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0150209>.

⁶ Benjamin R. Highland et al., "Attitudes towards Religion Predict Warmth towards Muslims in New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 122.

⁷ Kelly-Ann Allen, *The Psychology of Belonging* (Routledge, 2020), 2.

⁸ Colleen Boland, "Hybrid Identity and Practices to Negotiate Belonging: Madrid's Muslim Youth of Migrant Origin," *Comparative Migration Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 11; Roberta Raffaetà et al., "Chinese Immigrant Youth Identities and Belonging in Prato, Italy: Exploring the Intersections between Migration and Youth Studies," *Identities* 23, no. 4 (2016): 423.

⁹ Marco Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim: Second Generation Moroccans and Identity Negotiation between Religion and Community Belonging," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 77 (2020): 153.

discrimination and the processes that shape their identity formation in response to exclusion.¹⁰ One documented response is reactive ethnicity or reactive religiosity when religious identity is salient, where persistent discrimination reinforces identification with one's ethnic or religious group.¹¹ An alternative response is dissimulation, which involves concealing one's religious or ethnic identity to avoid negative treatment.¹² Both strategies demonstrate that individuals in stigmatised groups actively resist discrimination rather than passively accepting it. Given the documented Muslim acceptance gap and New Zealand's multicultural reputation,¹³ the question of how Muslim youth navigate belonging in this context is particularly pressing.

This study explores how Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand cope with perceived discrimination and how these experiences shape their sense of belonging to the Muslim community and wider New Zealand society. The study contributes to the literature on immigrant youth and identity formation in Western multicultural contexts. By examining how youth respond to discrimination through strategies such as increased religious engagement or concealment of identity, the findings underscore the resilience and agency of Muslim youth. These insights offer practical implications for inclusive policymaking and culturally responsive support systems. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 20 Muslim youth aged 16 to 29 across New Zealand, the study provides in-depth exploration of their experiences.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging represents a fundamental aspect of human existence, with scholars positioning it alongside basic physiological and psychological needs.¹⁴ At its core, belonging encompasses willingness to connect with others, work together, and provide mutual support, while also requiring the skills to engage in these relational processes effectively.¹⁵ Research consistently demonstrates that belonging is essential for psychological and physical health, influencing how individuals think about themselves and interact with the world around them.¹⁶ Conversely, in contexts characterised by exclusion and perceived otherness, developing a

¹⁰ Çetin Çelik, "'Having a German Passport will not make me German': Reactive Ethnicity and Oppositional Identity among Disadvantaged Male Turkish Second-Generation Youth in Germany," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 9 (2015): 1646.

¹¹ Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (University of California Press, 2001), 148; Karen Phalet et al., "Ways of 'Being Muslim': Religious Identities of Second-Generation Turks," in *The European Second Generation Compared: Does the Integration Context Matter?*, ed. Maurice Crul et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 295–96.

¹² Lauren Howes and Daniel Hammett, "Negotiating Identities and Emotional Belonging: Shan in Northern Thailand," *Emotion, Space and Society* 19 (2016): 26; Nyla R. Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away from a Group Identity: Different Strategies for Coping with Pervasive Discrimination," in *The Social Cure: Identity, Health and Well-Being*, ed. Jolanda Jetten et al. (Taylor & Francis, 2011), 137.

¹³ Shaver et al., "Religion and the Unmaking," 5, 20; Greaves et al., "Comparative Study," 261, 267.

¹⁴ Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (2021): 88; Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497.

¹⁵ Allen, *The Psychology of Belonging*, 85.

¹⁶ Allen et al., "Belonging," 91; Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong," 520.

genuine sense of belonging becomes problematic, with potential consequences for individuals' social functioning and overall wellbeing.¹⁷

Migration presents a significant challenge to an individual's sense of belonging, as the process of relocation inherently disrupts established connections to familiar people, places, and cultural contexts. Research on first- and second-generation migrants indicates that those who lack opportunities to establish belonging in their new environment experience greater difficulty managing psychological wellbeing, physical health, and successful transition.¹⁸ Within the host country, immigrants face the task of establishing new ties and cultivating a sense of belonging within communities that may operate according to different cultural norms and values.¹⁹ For immigrant youth, this negotiation involves balancing inherited cultural values with the acquired culture of the society in which they reside, often under assimilative pressures that expect younger generations to relinquish aspects of their cultural heritage.²⁰ Successfully establishing a sense of belonging in the host society is therefore essential for effective integration, enabling immigrants to participate fully in the social, educational, and economic opportunities available to them.²¹

Recent scholarship has advanced a multiple identities approach, which acknowledges the role that multiple identities play in the lives of cultural minority individuals.²² This approach recognises that individuals, particularly immigrant youth, may simultaneously hold distinct identifications with their heritage culture, their religion, and the national culture of the society in which they reside.²³ Importantly, research demonstrates that these multiple identifications are not inherently opposed to one another; strong attachment to one's heritage culture or religion does not preclude identification with the host society.²⁴ Rather, individuals may develop separate attachments to each of these identities, with the relative importance of religious, ethnic, or national belonging varying according to personal circumstances and social context.²⁵ For Muslim immigrant youth, this framework suggests that a sense of belonging to the Muslim community can coexist with belonging to the broader host society, as captured in

¹⁷ Lesley J. Pruitt, "Multiculturalism at Play: Young People and Citizenship in Australia," *Journal of Youth Studies* 19, no. 2 (2016): 273; Allen et al., "Belonging," 91, 93.

¹⁸ Allen et al., "Belonging," 92.

¹⁹ Feng Hou et al., "Patterns and Determinants of Immigrants' Sense of Belonging to Canada and their Source Country," *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series*, no. 383 (Statistics Canada, 2016), 11–13; Zeenah Adam and Colleen Ward, "Stress, Religious Coping, and Wellbeing in Acculturating Muslims," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 10, no. 2 (2016): 4.

²⁰ Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 151–52.

²¹ Hou et al., "Patterns and Determinants," 6, 12; Allen et al., "Belonging," 91–92.

²² Maram H. Abu-Rayya et al., "Cultural Identification and Religious Identification Contribute Differentially to the Adaptation of Australian Adolescent Muslims," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 54 (2016): 23.

²³ Abu-Rayya et al., "Cultural Identification and Religious Identification," 22–23, 30; Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 151.

²⁴ Abu-Rayya et al., "Cultural Identification and Religious Identification," 30; Hussain Raissi and Mariska Kappmeier, "Implications of Religious Salience and Religious Practices on the Senses of Belonging to the Larger Aotearoa/New Zealand Society and the Muslim Community," *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* (2025): 13–14.

²⁵ Abu-Rayya et al., "Cultural Identification and Religious Identification," 30, 32; Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 157; Raissi and Kappmeier, "Implications of Religious Salience," 6.

the sentiment expressed by second generation Moroccans in Italy: “I feel Moroccan, I feel Italian, and I feel Muslim.”²⁶ This perspective challenges earlier acculturation models that limited analysis to two cultural dimensions and instead allows for a more nuanced understanding of how minority youth construct and negotiate their identities across multiple domains of belonging.²⁷ This multiple belonging framework provides the theoretical lens through which the present study examines how Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand navigate their sense of belonging to their religious community and the wider New Zealand society.

Discrimination and its Impact on Belonging

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, the following section examines the impact of discrimination on belonging processes within the New Zealand context.

Discrimination refers to unfair treatment of individuals based on their membership in a social group, such as their ethnicity, religion, or cultural background.²⁸ This treatment can manifest at the interpersonal level, through direct hostile interactions between individuals, and at the systemic level, through institutional policies and structural barriers.²⁹ In contemporary Western societies, overtly discriminatory behaviour is often illegal, meaning that discrimination frequently takes more subtle and indirect forms.³⁰ Despite being covert, indirect discrimination remains profoundly harmful, affecting multiple facets of individuals’ lives including mental and physical health, economic prospects, social connections, and overall sense of belonging.³¹ Research consistently demonstrates that perceived discrimination is linked to depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, and diminished life satisfaction among minority groups.

Establishing a sense of belonging in a host society fundamentally requires feeling accepted and valued by the wider community.³² Discrimination, however, signals rejection and exclusion, communicating to minority individuals that they are not welcome or do not fit within the social fabric of their society of settlement.³³ According to the Rejection-Identification Model, experiences of discrimination decrease individuals’ psychological attachment and identification with the broader society, eroding trust and confidence in the host community.³⁴ Young Muslim immigrants may find discrimination difficult to tolerate, as they are simultaneously navigating the developmental challenges of identity formation while facing

²⁶ Raissi and Kappmeier, “Implications of Religious Salience,” 14–16; Rizzo et al., “I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim,” 151, 155, 157; Abu-Rayya et al., “Cultural Identification and Religious Identification,” 30.

²⁷ Abu-Rayya et al., “Cultural Identification and Religious Identification,” 22–23.

²⁸ Rosita Fibbi et al., *Migration and Discrimination*, IMISCOE Research Series (Springer, 2021), 13–16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14–18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3, 13, 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 66–69.

³² Allen et al., “Belonging,” 87, 92, 94; Hou et al., “Patterns and Determinants,” 10.

³³ Çelik, “Having a German Passport,” 1654.

³⁴ Branscombe et al., “Moving Toward or Away,” 118; Hussain Raissi and Mariska Kappmeier, “Belonging amidst Bias: The Impact of Perceived Discrimination on Muslim Youth in Aotearoa/New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 54, no. 1 (2025): 79.

social tension related to their religious orientation.³⁵ In this climate of exclusion and perceived otherness, developing a genuine sense of belonging to the wider society becomes problematic.

Despite New Zealand's reputation as a tolerant and multicultural society, research has consistently documented the existence of discrimination against the Muslim community.³⁶ As noted in the introduction, a substantial Muslim acceptance gap exists, with Muslims facing more negative attitudes than other religious minorities, including Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews.³⁷ The media plays a significant role in shaping and perpetuating these prejudicial attitudes; research demonstrates that greater media exposure predicts higher levels of anti-Muslim prejudice.³⁸ The Christchurch mosque attacks starkly revealed the extent of underlying hostility towards Muslims in a nation that had long considered itself immune to such hatred.³⁹ This tragedy demonstrated that, despite the country's multicultural aspirations, anti-Muslim prejudice had taken root and posed a genuine threat to the safety and wellbeing of the Muslim community.

Discrimination against Muslims is not experienced uniformly; rather, it has a distinctly gendered dimension, with Muslim women facing disproportionately higher levels of hostility.⁴⁰ The hijab, or headscarf, is a highly visible marker of Muslim identity, making women who wear it immediately identifiable as Muslim in public spaces and consequently more vulnerable to targeted abuse.⁴¹ Research on Islamophobic incidents reveals the stark gendered nature of this discrimination: in one comprehensive study, nearly three-quarters of verbal abuse victims were women wearing religious head-coverings, while attackers were overwhelmingly male and of Anglo-Celtic background.⁴² The forms of abuse reported by hijab-wearing women include verbal harassment, physical assault, having their headscarves forcibly removed, being spat on, and receiving hate mail.⁴³ This pattern highlights the intersection of religious and gender-based discrimination, where Muslim women become doubly targeted, for their faith and visibility as women who do not conform to Western dress norms.⁴⁴

³⁵ Jaimee Stuart, "A Qualitative Analysis of Muslim Young Adults' Adaptation Experiences in New Zealand," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 8, no. 2 (2014): 22.

³⁶ Shaver et al., "Religion and the Unmaking," 2; Greaves et al., "Comparative Study," 260–61.

³⁷ Shaver et al., "Religion and the Unmaking," 2; Greaves et al., "Comparative Study," 260, 267.

³⁸ Shaver et al., "News Exposure Predicts Anti-Muslim Prejudice," 1, 8; Shah Nister Kabir and Michael Bourk, "Representing Islam and Muslims in New Zealand Newspapers," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2012): 325, 334.

³⁹ Ward et al., "Critical Narrative Review," 36, 44.

⁴⁰ Fethi Mansouri, "Islam and Muslims in Australia: The Social Experiences of Early Settlement and the Politics of Contemporary Race Relations," *Politikologija Religije* 14, no. 1 (2020): 133; Derya Iner, ed., *Islamophobia in Australia 2014–2016* (Charles Sturt University and ISRA, 2017), 69, 85.

⁴¹ Marieke Jasperse et al., "Identity, Perceived Religious Discrimination, and Psychological Well-Being in Muslim Immigrant Women," *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 61, no. 2 (2012): 251–253, 263.

⁴² Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia*, 45, 69, 85.

⁴³ Mansouri, "Islam and Muslims in Australia," 133.

⁴⁴ Jasperse et al., "Identity, Perceived Religious Discrimination," 252, 255; Anita Harris and Ameera Karimshah, "Young Muslims, Stigma and the Work of Normality," *Sociology* 53, no. 4 (2019): 617–18, 623.

Coping Strategy: Reactive Religiosity

Reactive religiosity refers to an increased attachment to religion that emerges in response to experiences of discrimination and exclusion.⁴⁵ This concept derives from reactive ethnicity theory, which posits that when immigrants and their descendants experience blocked upward mobility, legal exclusion, or discrimination, they reaffirm their ties and identification with their ethnic in-group.⁴⁶ When minority group members perceive pervasive discrimination, they may strengthen their identification with their religious community, as unfair treatment based on group membership signals rejection from the dominant society.⁴⁷ Importantly, this response represents an adaptive strategy rather than passive withdrawal; by turning toward others who share their stigmatised identity, individuals access a community that will not reject them on that basis.⁴⁸

Experiences of discrimination create solidarity within the religious community, as shared experiences of unfair treatment foster ethnic and religious cohesion among those who face similar rejection.⁴⁹ The religious community provides important psychological resources, including a shared sense of meaning and purpose, as well as instrumental support through congregational services such as charity and counselling.⁵⁰ Research demonstrates that strong religious belonging can buffer the psychological harm caused by discrimination; for example, engaging in religious practices has been found to protect life satisfaction against the detrimental effects of acculturative stress,⁵¹ while higher religious participation strengthens collective self-esteem among youth facing discrimination.⁵² However, when the dominant society continues to reject and devalue the minority group's culture, reactive religiosity may develop into an oppositional identity characterised by resistance to mainstream institutions.⁵³ Through this process of increased group identification, minority members can convert what the dominant society frames as a "mark of shame" into a "badge of honour," thereby reclaiming pride in their religious identity.⁵⁴

Coping Strategy: Dissimulation

Dissimulation represents an individualistic coping strategy in which minority group members conceal or downplay their stigmatised identity to avoid discrimination and "pass" as

⁴⁵ David Voas and Fenella Fleischmann, "Islam Moves West: Religious Change in the First and Second Generations," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 537.

⁴⁶ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, 151; Çelik, "Having a German Passport," 1648, 1654.

⁴⁷ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 135–153; Motahareh Nabavi, "Canadian Muslim Reactive Identity Formation in the Face of Discrimination: The Possibilities of Imagined Localities," *Religious and Socio-Political Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2022): 41, 45.

⁴⁸ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 135–153.

⁴⁹ Çelik, "Having a German Passport," 1648, 1654, 1658.

⁵⁰ Adam and Ward, "Stress, Religious Coping and Wellbeing," 17; Voas and Fleischmann, "Islam Moves West," 529.

⁵¹ Adam and Ward, "Stress, Religious Coping and Wellbeing," 14.

⁵² Rania Mustafa and Shabnam Javdani, "An Investigation of the Identity of First Generation American Muslim Youth Participating in Muslim Students Associations," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 10, no. 2 (2016): 70; Jasperse et al., "Identity, Perceived Religious Discrimination," 261.

⁵³ Voas and Fleischmann, "Islam Moves West," 529; Çelik, "Having a German Passport," 1648.

⁵⁴ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 135–153.

members of the majority group.⁵⁵ This strategy becomes viable when the boundaries between minority and majority groups are perceived as relatively permeable, and when individuals believe that concealing their identity will limit their exposure to further discrimination.⁵⁶ Methods of dissimulation include altering physical appearance such as clothing and makeup, adopting majority-sounding names, adjusting language or accent, and modifying the presentation of experiences on employment applications to appear more culturally neutral.⁵⁷ These practices allow individuals to navigate spaces of potential discrimination more safely; by successfully dissociating from an identity that elicits hostility, individuals may protect themselves from the immediate harms of discriminatory treatment.⁵⁸ Importantly, dissimulation is often context-dependent; individuals may deploy situational identities, concealing their minority status in certain settings such as workplaces or public spaces while maintaining and expressing their cultural identity within their community.⁵⁹

While dissimulation can offer immediate benefits by reducing an individual's direct exposure to discriminatory treatment, this strategy carries significant psychological and social costs.⁶⁰ Research indicates that individuals who conceal a devalued group membership report lower self-confidence and experience greater feelings of shame compared to those who do not conceal their identity.⁶¹ Furthermore, concealing one's stigmatised identity undermines the formation of a positive group identity, making it difficult for individuals to develop pride and self-worth based on their cultural or religious membership.⁶² While dissimulation may protect the individual, it does little to change the overall conditions faced by the stigmatised group; the group as a whole remains a target of discrimination regardless of individual members' concealment efforts.⁶³ It is worth noting that the practice of identity concealment under adverse circumstances has historical precedent within Islamic tradition, particularly in the Shi'i concept of *taqiyya*, which permitted dissimulation of religious identity when facing persecution or danger.⁶⁴ Ultimately, whether individuals employ dissimulation or reactive religiosity as a coping strategy depends on the structural conditions they face, including the perceived permeability of group boundaries and the availability of community support.

⁵⁵ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 136; Sonia K. Kang et al., "Whitened Résumés: Race and Self-Presentation in the Labor Market," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2016): 471.

⁵⁶ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 137; Howes and Hammett, "Negotiating Identities and Emotional Belonging," 22.

⁵⁷ Howes and Hammett, "Negotiating Identities and Emotional Belonging," 25; Kang et al., "Whitened Résumés," 474–78.

⁵⁸ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 136; Howes and Hammett, "Negotiating Identities and Emotional Belonging," 22, 25.

⁵⁹ Howes and Hammett, "Negotiating Identities and Emotional Belonging," 22, 25; Kang et al., "Whitened Résumés," 493.

⁶⁰ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 145; Manuela Barreto et al., "Working under Cover: Performance-Related Self-Confidence among Members of Contextually Devalued Groups who try to Pass," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36, no. 3 (2006): 338–39.

⁶¹ Barreto et al., "Working under Cover," 338.

⁶² Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 145.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Farhad Daftary, "Religious Identity, Dissimulation and Assimilation: The Ismaili Experience," in *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 48.

Muslim immigrant youth navigating belonging in Western multicultural societies may face discrimination that erodes their attachment to the host society while simultaneously strengthening ties to their religious community. The literature identifies two primary coping strategies: reactive religiosity, where individuals strengthen their religious identity and community bonds in response to exclusion; and dissimulation, where individuals conceal aspects of their identity to avoid discriminatory treatment. Both strategies reflect the agency of stigmatised individuals in responding to structural constraints. This study examines how these processes operate among Muslim youth in New Zealand, a context characterised by multicultural aspirations and documented anti-Muslim prejudice, with attention to how coping strategies shape participants' sense of belonging to the Muslim community and the wider New Zealand society.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty Muslim immigrant youth (9 females, 11 males; aged 16–29 years) participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were permanent residents or citizens of New Zealand with immigrant or refugee backgrounds, recruited through snowball sampling from a larger mixed-methods study. The sample represented diverse ethnicities and Islamic sects from 13 countries: Afghanistan (n=7), Malaysia (n=2), Samoan-Pakistan (n=2), China (n=1), Fiji (n=1), India (n=1), Iraq (n=1), Iran (n=1), Kenya (n=1), Singapore (n=1), Somalia (n=1), and Syria (n=1). Participants had diverse education levels and occupations and had resided in New Zealand for varying durations. The majority of female participants wore hijab, making their Muslim identity visibly identifiable. Male participants generally had fewer visible religious markers, though some maintained beards as a religious practice.

Procedure

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand. The study received ethical approval from the University of Otago Ethics Committee (Approval No. 20/082), and all participants provided informed consent.

Interviews were conducted between April and July 2021 across four New Zealand cities: Dunedin (n=7), Auckland (n=8), Christchurch (n=3), and Wellington (n=2). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted face-to-face (n=12) or via Zoom (n=8). Face-to-face interviews took place in private rooms at the University of Otago. The researcher, who disclosed his identity as a Muslim and former refugee to establish rapport, provided an overview of the study objectives before each interview. Interviews lasted 30-40 minutes and were conducted in English (n=12) or Dari/Persian (n=8) based on participant preference, as the researcher is fluent in all three languages.

The interview guide focused on two areas: (a) sense of belonging to New Zealand society and the Muslim community (e.g., “How would you describe your sense of belonging to New Zealand?”; “What elements enhance or hinder your feelings of belonging?”), and (b) experiences of discrimination and its effects on belonging (e.g., “Have you experienced discrimination in New Zealand due to your religious or ethnic background?”; “How did these experiences affect your sense of belonging?”).

Data Analysis

English interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and verified for accuracy; Dari/Persian interviews were manually transcribed and translated by the researcher. Translation accuracy was verified through forward-backward translation with two independent bilingual speakers.

A deductive thematic analysis was employed, guided by the theoretical frameworks of reactive religiosity⁶⁵ and dissimulation.⁶⁶ Following Braun and Clarke’s six-step process,⁶⁷ the researcher familiarised himself with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed themes for coherence, defined and named themes, and produced the final report. Data was managed using NVivo 12.

Several steps ensured trustworthiness. The researcher engaged with the transcripts through multiple readings, cross-checked themes against raw data, and conducted peer debriefing with research supervisors. The researcher maintained reflexive awareness of his positionality as a Muslim and former refugee, documenting observations and analytical decisions in a research journal throughout the process.

FINDINGS

This section presents the qualitative findings from the semi-structured interviews with 20 Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand. The findings are organised around three key themes that emerged from the data, guided by the theoretical frameworks of multiple belonging, reactive religiosity, and dissimulation introduced in the literature review. First, we examine how participants conceptualise and experience their sense of belonging. Second, we explore their experiences with discrimination. Third, we analyse the coping strategies participants employ in response to perceived discrimination.

⁶⁵ Fenella Fleischmann and Karen Phalet, “Integration and Religiosity among the Turkish Second Generation in Europe: A Comparative Analysis across Four Capital Cities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012): 328; Voas and Fleischmann, “Islam Moves West,” 532.

⁶⁶ Daftary, “Religious Identity, Dissimulation and Assimilation,” 48; Branscombe et al., “Moving Toward or Away,” 136; Kang et al., “Whitened Résumés,” 469.

⁶⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 86.

Multiple Senses of Belonging

Consistent with the multiple belonging framework,⁶⁸ participants demonstrated that religious and national identifications can coexist rather than conflict. Of the 20 participants, 16 expressed positive feelings of belonging to the Muslim community and wider New Zealand society, while prioritising their Muslim identity. Four participants expressed more conditional or ambivalent connections to New Zealand.

When asked about how they prioritise their sense of belonging, many participants articulated a hierarchy that placed Muslim identity first, followed by ethnic and national identities:

First, I am Muslim and then, it is hard to say which one comes after...you know this society [New Zealand] accepted me, they helped me a lot...I can't forget that and the love that they gave me. (S1, male)

I would say first I am Muslim, then, I feel I am Malay, and then New Zealander. Yeah, I would consider like, my family is in Palmerston North, so I would consider Palmerston North as my home. But I also still consider Malaysia my home. So, I feel like I belong in all those places. (M1, female)

These narratives illustrate that participants do not perceive their Muslim identity as incompatible with belonging to New Zealand. Rather, they navigate multiple, layered identifications that encompass religious, ethnic, and national dimensions simultaneously.

However, not all participants experienced belonging to New Zealand in the same way. Four participants (3 female, 1 male) expressed more conditional connections to New Zealand, often linked to experiences of not feeling fully accepted:

We don't really call ourselves Kiwi, even though we have citizenship...there's a part of us that still feels...like...we don't exactly belong in New Zealand. We're just here temporarily, or like...we're here under some sort of condition. So, this is our home for sure, but in terms of belonging, it is a very different issue. (K14, female, hijab-wearing)

Importantly, participants understood belonging as a reciprocal process requiring acceptance from the broader society:

I guess it would be a bit hard to feel like I belong if the group didn't accept me. So, for me, belonging is not just about how I feel, it's also about how others view me. (M1, female)

This finding highlights the relational nature of belonging; participants recognised that their sense of inclusion depends not only on their identification with New Zealand but also on whether they feel their presence and contributions are valued by the wider society.

⁶⁸ Enzo Colombo and Paola Rebughini, *Children of Immigrants in a Globalized World: A Generational Experience* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 95; Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 152.

Experiences of Discrimination

Participants reported varied experiences with discrimination in New Zealand. Their experiences ranged from no personal encounters to frequent hostile treatment, with a notable gendered dimension emerging from the data.

Participants Without Personal Discrimination Experiences

Several participants reported no personal experiences of discrimination, though they acknowledged awareness of discrimination faced by others in their community. These participants often held positive views of New Zealand:

This country is a blessing for us...There is no restrictions so you can pray freely, and you can do all other Islamic obligations freely, even in the universities and other places you can have your beard, and ladies can wear hijab. (F1, male)

Notably, even participants who did not personally experience discrimination were aware that others in their religious community faced it. One male participant (M11) stated: "I did not face discrimination in New Zealand," while also acknowledging that "my sister faced many instances of discrimination."

Participants with Minor or Occasional Discrimination Experiences

Some participants reported minor or occasional experiences of discrimination that they characterised as infrequent or manageable:

People are nice here...I barely had experienced some words on the streets, but that don't happen often. (M1, female)

Participants with Considerable Discrimination Experiences

Participants who reported considerable or frequent experiences of discrimination were predominantly hijab-wearing women. The hijab is a visible marker of Muslim identity that made them identifiable in public spaces:

Well...like...in general, in life, when you're walking down the street sometimes, or when you're in an area, which is majority white, or majority belong to a certain religion or culture, and then you go in, and you're obviously wearing hijab and you're Muslim...it's very likely that they say oh who is she? She doesn't belong here. She doesn't look like she's from here. (L57, female, hijab-wearing)

The gendered nature of discrimination was particularly evident in sibling comparisons. When interviewed separately, M11 (male) reported no personal discrimination, while his sister N1 (female, hijab-wearing) described discrimination as a routine experience: "[It is] normal to face discrimination."

Participants also reported discrimination in institutional settings. One male participant (A6), born and raised in New Zealand, discussed perceived bias in employment and interactions with police, attributing some of his experiences to his Muslim-associated name:

My name is Mohammad, and my Indian best friend's name is Matthew, a Christian name...in a situation where we both applied at the same place for our job. I personally think Matthew, for example, will have a higher chance of getting the job or getting accepted to come into the interview. Because Mohammad doesn't sound like he is white. (A6, male)

Regarding police interactions, A6 offered a nuanced observation, differentiating between officers of different ethnic backgrounds:

New Zealand police especially the white do not abide the law, plus we have to abide by the rules...whereas if the police officer is from India, or a diverse cultural person, there is more chance a police officer who is not from white, I'd say...giving you a warning... being much more nicer to you. (A6, male)

This account suggests that perceived discrimination may vary depending on the identity of authority figures, with participants feeling more fairly treated by officers from minority backgrounds.

Coping Strategies in Response to Discrimination

Participants who experienced discrimination employed various coping strategies. Consistent with the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review, two primary patterns emerged: reactive religiosity and dissimulation.

Reactive Religiosity: Some participants described strengthening their religious identity and increasing their engagement with the Muslim community in direct response to experiences of discrimination. This pattern aligns with the reactive religiosity framework,⁶⁹ which posits that discrimination can lead individuals to seek solidarity and psychological resources within their stigmatised in-group.

L57 (female, hijab-wearing) described being called a "terrorist" by classmates during her first year of high school. When asked about the impact of this incident:

When that happened, I think it encouraged me more to my religion than it pushed me away from it. Because at a very early age, family and in Masjid [Mosque], they teach us to be strong...if something like that happens...it is quite normal. You know...just keep your religion strong...religion is stronger than what these people are saying. (L57, female)

For these participants, the religious community provided a sense of safety, shared experience, and collective support that buffered against the isolating effects of discrimination:

It just feels a bit safer to have other people who are also minorities with you in a space where you have to share your opinions about some kind of things. Because sometimes, if you're by yourself, and you're talking about your struggles, it feels like you're playing the brown card. Whereas, if there are other people who are like you, it's not your personal opinion...it's like a general experience that everyone shares. (N1, female)

⁶⁹ Voas and Fleischmann, "Islam Moves West," 532; Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 139.

This narrative illustrates how belonging to a religious community transforms individual experiences of discrimination into collective experiences, providing validation and reducing feelings of isolation.

Dissimulation: Other participants described employing dissimulation strategies, concealing or downplaying aspects of their religious or ethnic identity to avoid discrimination. This approach, theorised by Branscombe et al.,⁷⁰ is feasible when group boundaries are perceived as permeable and individuals believe that concealment may reduce their exposure to discriminatory treatment. Importantly, dissimulation was typically context-dependent, with participants adjusting their identity expression based on perceived safety and social environment.

A1 (male) described concealing his identity during childhood and adolescence:

When I was a kid and a teenager, I always hid my identity...and I passed as a local New Zealander...no one could understand it...some of my friends still do that...because they don't have information about their own identity and language so when you ask them, they say I am a New Zealander. But when I grew up physically and mentally and then I have seen other people, especially Arabs, who were proud of their culture of origin, and then I revealed my identity. (A1, male)

Notably, A1's narrative reveals that dissimulation may be a developmental phase rather than a permanent strategy, with identity expression potentially increasing as individuals mature and encounter positive role models from their community.

M12 (female, hijab-wearing) described temporarily concealing her hijab following the Christchurch mosque attacks due to safety concerns:

Sometime after the shootings, though I wore a scarf, I would try to hide it, like wear a hoodie over it. (M12, female)

This example illustrates how dissimulation can be a protective response to perceived threat, particularly in the aftermath of violent events targeting the Muslim community.

The context-dependent nature of dissimulation was evident in participants' accounts of how their identity expression varied across different social environments. F30 (female) described how her approach evolved:

I went in a Catholic high school...for the whole time I didn't wear hijab, and I didn't talk about my religion...I presume that some of them knew that I am Muslim. But when I moved to Dunedin, I have met many other Muslim sisters who gave me more feeling of safety and security...then I started to go to mosque and wearing hijab. (F30, female)

F30's narrative reveals that the transition from dissimulation to visible religious expression was facilitated by finding a supportive religious community. This suggests that the availability of in-group support influences whether individuals continue to conceal their identity or feel safe to express it openly.

⁷⁰ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 136.

Similarly, L57 (female) described changes in her identity expression during adolescence:

When I first came here, I wouldn't really talk about my religion nor my culture. But once I went into high school, then I started wearing the hijab. (L57, female)

The transition to visible religious expression during high school, a period typically associated with identity exploration and formation, suggests that developmental processes may interact with experiences of belonging and discrimination to shape coping strategy selection. These findings indicate that dissimulation is not a fixed response but a fluid strategy that individuals adapt based on their social context, developmental stage, and access to community support.

The findings reveal three key patterns. First, consistent with the multiple belonging framework, the majority of participants demonstrated that Muslim and New Zealand identities can coexist, though Muslim identity was typically prioritised. Second, discrimination experiences varied considerably across the sample, with a clear gendered dimension: hijab-wearing women reported more frequent and overt discrimination than men. Third, participants who experienced discrimination actively employed coping strategies rather than passively accepting negative treatment. These strategies aligned with the theoretical frameworks of reactive religiosity and dissimulation, with some participants demonstrating context-dependent use of both approaches. These findings demonstrate the agency and resilience of Muslim immigrant youth in navigating their sense of belonging within New Zealand society.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand, examining their sense of belonging, encounters with discrimination, and coping strategies. The findings contribute to understanding how religious minority youth navigate identity and belonging within a Western multicultural context, while demonstrating their agency in responding to prejudice.

Consistent with the multiple belonging framework,⁷¹ the majority of participants expressed positive feelings of belonging to the Muslim community and wider New Zealand society. Participants described a hierarchy in which Muslim identity was prioritised, while still expressing genuine attachment to New Zealand. As one participant articulated: "I would say first I am Muslim, then, I feel I am Malay, and then New Zealander... So, I feel like I belong in all those places." This pattern resonates with research on second-generation Muslims in Europe, where participants similarly expressed layered identities: "I feel Moroccan, I feel Italian, and I feel Muslim."⁷² These findings challenge assimilationist assumptions that minority youth must relinquish aspects of their heritage culture to develop belonging to the host society.

⁷¹ Colombo and Rebughini, *Children of Immigrants in a Globalized World*, 95; Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 152.

⁷² Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 151.

However, just a few participants expressed more conditional connections to New Zealand, often linked to experiences of not feeling fully accepted. Participants understood belonging as a reciprocal process requiring acceptance from the broader society. As one participant noted, belonging “is not just about how I feel, it’s also about how others view me.” This understanding aligns with the Rejection-Identification Model,⁷³ which posits that experiences of discrimination decrease psychological attachment to the broader society.

Participants reported varied experiences with discrimination, ranging from no personal encounters to frequent hostile treatment. Notably, participants who reported considerable discrimination were predominantly hijab-wearing women. This finding directly supports research demonstrating that Muslim women face disproportionately higher levels of hostility due to the visibility of religious dress.⁷⁴ The hijab is as an immediately identifiable marker of Muslim identity, rendering women who wear it visible targets for prejudice in public spaces.⁷⁵ The gendered nature of discrimination was evident in sibling comparisons: one male participant reported no personal discrimination, while his hijab-wearing sister described discrimination as routine. These within-family contrasts underscore that differential treatment reflects visible religious identity rather than other contextual factors.

Participants who experienced discrimination did not passively accept negative treatment; rather, they actively employed coping strategies. Some participants described reactive religiosity, while others described dissimulation. These patterns align with the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature.

Participants who reported reactive religiosity described strengthening their religious identity in direct response to discrimination. As one participant explained, after being called a “terrorist” at school, “When that happened, I think it encouraged me more to my religion than it pushed me away from it...religion is stronger than what these people are saying.” The religious community provided safety, shared experience, and collective support that buffered against the isolating effects of discrimination. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that strong religious belonging can buffer the psychological harm caused by discrimination.⁷⁶

Participants who reported dissimulation described concealing aspects of their religious identity to avoid discrimination.⁷⁷ Importantly, dissimulation was typically context-dependent rather than absolute. One participant described temporarily concealing her hijab following the Christchurch mosque attacks: “I would try to hide it, like wear a hoodie over it.” Another

⁷³ Raissi and Kappmeier, “Implications of Religious Salience,” 1; Branscombe et al., “Moving Toward or Away,” 136.

⁷⁴ Jasperse et al., “Identity, Perceived Religious Discrimination,” 252, 263; Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia*, 69–70; Mansouri, “Islam and Muslims in Australia,” 133.

⁷⁵ Jasperse et al., “Identity, Perceived Religious Discrimination,” 251–52; Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia*, 69–70; Mansouri, “Islam and Muslims in Australia,” 133.

⁷⁶ Adam and Ward, “Stress, Religious Coping and Wellbeing,” 3, 17; Rania Mustafa and Shabnam Javdani, “An Investigation of the Identity of First Generation American Muslim Youth Participating in Muslim Students Associations,” *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 10, no. 2 (2016): 58, 72.

⁷⁷ Branscombe et al., “Moving Toward or Away,” 136.

participant described not wearing hijab while attending a Catholic high school, but later adopted visible religious expression after finding a supportive Muslim community elsewhere. These accounts suggest that dissimulation is a situational strategy that individuals deploy in hostile contexts while maintaining their religious identity in safer spaces. The transition from dissimulation to visible religious expression was often facilitated by finding supportive in-group communities, suggesting that the availability of community support influences whether individuals feel safe to express their identity openly.

Taken together, these coping strategies have important implications for the wellbeing of Muslim youth. Discrimination directly threatens wellbeing by communicating to minority individuals that they are not welcome within the social landscape of their society of settlement, eroding trust and confidence in the host community⁷⁸ and undermining the sense of belonging that research identifies as essential for psychological and physical health.⁷⁹ Reactive religiosity appears to offer a protective function: by strengthening identification with the religious community, participants accessed shared meaning, collective solidarity, and congregational support that buffered against the psychological harm of discrimination.⁸⁰ In contrast, while dissimulation may reduce immediate exposure to discriminatory treatment, existing research indicates that sustained identity concealment carries significant psychological costs, including lower self-confidence, greater feelings of shame, and an undermined capacity to develop pride and self-worth based on one's cultural or religious membership.⁸¹ The accounts of participants in this study are consistent with these findings; those who practised dissimulation described it as a response to perceived threat rather than a freely chosen expression of identity, and several transitioned away from concealment once supportive community environments became available. This pattern suggests that while both strategies reflect agency, they differ in their longer-term implications for wellbeing: reactive religiosity fosters belonging and positive identity, whereas prolonged dissimulation may compromise authenticity and psychological health. Practitioners and policymakers should therefore attend not only to the presence of discrimination but also to the conditions that push youth toward identity concealment, recognising that environments which necessitate dissimulation impose hidden wellbeing costs even when overt discriminatory incidents are absent.

These findings have several implications for theory and practice. First, the prevalence of multiple belonging among participants supports the multiple identities approach,⁸² demonstrating that strong Muslim identity can coexist with genuine attachment to the host society. Second, the concentration of considerable discrimination among hijab-wearing women underscores the importance of attending to visibility in understanding Islamophobia.

⁷⁸ Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia*, 75–77; Mansouri, "Islam and Muslims in Australia," 137, 142.

⁷⁹ Allen et al., "Belonging," 88, 91; Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong," 499.

⁸⁰ Adam and Ward, "Stress, Religious Coping and Wellbeing," 17; Mustafa and Javdani, "Discrimination and American Muslim Youth Identity," 58, 72; Voas and Fleischmann, "Islam Moves West," 536–37.

⁸¹ Barreto et al., "Working under Cover," 338–39, 344–45; Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 135–153.

⁸² Colombo and Rebughini, *Children of Immigrants in a Globalized World*, 97–98, 125; Abu-Rayya et al., "Cultural Identification and Religious Identification," 21–33; Rizzo et al., "I Feel Moroccan, I Feel Italian, and I Feel Muslim," 151, 157.

Interventions aimed at reducing discrimination may need to address the targeting of visibly Muslim women. Third, reactive religiosity and dissimulation represent adaptive responses reflecting individual agency within structural constraints. Practitioners working with Muslim youth should recognise both strategies as legitimate responses to discrimination while being attentive to the potential psychological costs of sustained identity concealment.⁸³

Several limitations should be considered. The sample of 20 participants, while appropriate for qualitative enquiry aimed at depth and richness of understanding, does not permit generalisation to the broader population of Muslim youth in New Zealand. The sample did not include men who wore distinctly visible religious attire, limiting the ability to disentangle the effects of gender and visibility on discrimination experiences. Data collection occurred during 2021, approximately two years after the Christchurch mosque attacks, which may have heightened participants' awareness of discrimination. Finally, the categorisation of coping strategies into reactive religiosity and dissimulation may not fully capture the complexity of participants' responses, as some employed context-dependent strategies that shifted over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Muslim immigrant youth in New Zealand navigate their sense of belonging while responding to discrimination. The findings reveal that the majority of participants maintained multiple, layered identifications, demonstrating that strong Muslim identity need not preclude belonging to the host society. However, discrimination, particularly for visibly Muslim women, poses a significant challenge to this belonging. Participants who experienced discrimination actively employed coping strategies, with some strengthening their religious identity and community ties while others concealed aspects of their identity in hostile contexts. Both strategies reflect the agency and resilience of Muslim youth in navigating their social environments. These findings underscore the importance of creating inclusive environments that allow religious minority youth to express their identities safely while developing genuine belonging to the wider society.

⁸³ Branscombe et al., "Moving Toward or Away," 135–153; Adam and Ward, "Stress, Religious Coping and Wellbeing," 19–20; Jasperse et al., "Identity, Perceived Religious Discrimination," 266; Raissi and Kappmeier, "Belonging amidst Bias," 79.

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