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YOUNG MUSLIMS IN AUSTRALIA AND THEIR IDENTITY FORMATION

Jan A. Ali*

Abstract: This article examines identity construction among young Muslims in multicultural and multi-faith Australia. Multiculturalism and the social position of young Muslims in Australia have long been poorly perceived by many bigoted politicians and public intellectuals who all argue against social cohesion of diverse cultures believing minority groups form ghettos. In media presentations and political discourses, Muslims are often constructed as the “Other,” forcing many Muslims to reconstruct their identities around religion – Islam – as the principal marker of identity. It is suggested in the paper that young Muslims in Australia face multiple challenges to live out their principal identity despite Australia’s multicultural and democratic claims. Many young Muslims continue to experience marginalisation and “Othering” and even many Australian-born third generation Muslims struggle to gain general recognition as valued citizens of Australia. The article argues that young Muslims have a developed capacity to work through depoliticised, hybrid and contextualised identities in multicultural and multi-faith Australia; however, they still experience unreasonable and unequal burdens to constantly prove their allegiance to Australia to be considered “true Australians.” Under such pressures sometimes young Muslims are forced to downplay or even conceal their Islamic identity in which they normally find comfort and security. Through forced espousal of secular values in an endeavour to be recognised as integrated “Australians,” some young Muslims suffer from an identity crisis, constantly re-evaluating who they are.

Keywords: *Australian Muslims, Islam, identity, marginalisation, multiculturalism, Other*

INTRODUCTION

Identity refers to the idea of self-concept and explains who we are as individuals and in relation to each other. It is composed of unique character attributes that make a person distinct from others or a group different from other groups. It is a social category in which we adhere to the membership rules, exhibit certain character attributes, perform expected behaviours and project socially distinguishing features – all of which define us. Identity has direct effects on

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how we organise our lives, express ourselves individually and as part of a collective, exercise social power, and produce and reproduce expected behaviours. Identity is affected by and contributes to the overall social context and signifies features of sameness in relation to a person's association with others and to a distinct group of people.

Some scholars take identity to mean the sense of self and belonging to a particular group determined by objective criteria such as shared biological and physiological traits, which are naturally given and pre-determined. Others believe that identity is a social construction formed predominantly through social interaction and unfixed and constantly evolving. Both these views attract criticism but despite this they remain important in any discussion of identity and exert strong influence on the conceptualisation of identity in contemporary period. Academic discourse about identity gives the term diverse meanings with some emphasising the elemental and abiding sameness and others stress the identity's fluid, contingent, fragmentary and negotiable nature. These different conceptualisations of 'identity' make it difficult to define the concept with any degree of certainty and consensus. However, sociologists and scholars still need to define types of identity and formation of identity.

In this paper, identity means a collection of different components, including a dynamic and fluid set of qualities of human sense of self and social self-expression that makes us who we are and feel whole as people. In light of this definition, I examine identity construction among young Muslims in multicultural and multi-faith Australia. In Australia, the support for minority cultures such as Muslims has been somewhat positive. Young Muslims particularly have been recognised in academic and intellectual circles as valued citizens who make important contributions to the overall welfare of society. However, multiculturalism and the social position of young Muslims in particular have long been poorly perceived by ill-informed and biased politicians and public commentators who all argue against social cohesion of diverse cultures believing minority groups form ghettos. Literature reveals that exclusionary media and biased political discourses have repeatedly constructed Muslims as the 'Other,' leaving many Muslims to reconstruct their identities around religion – Islam – as the principal marker of identity.

Many young Muslims in Australia are third generation and their identity has been under constant evolution. This is not a field-based paper but it seeks to evaluate the state of research on young Muslims' identity formation in Australia. In other words, it examines what has already been written on this topic, contextualises wide-ranging research material, and then using the material, explores how young Muslims learn to produce and reproduce themselves through engagement in socio-cultural exchange and how interactional dynamics shape their sense of 'self.' The focus is to gain deep insight into young Muslim identity construction in a modern multicultural and multi-faith Australia. Thus, the aim is to generate distinct and useful knowledge from vast and diverse research material. It is suggested that young Muslims in Australia face multiple challenges to freely project their principal identity, which is their Islamic identity. Given these challenges, the paper investigates the problems faced by young Muslims in building their identity. Despite Australia's multicultural and democratic claims, Muslims as a minority, particularly some young Muslims, still undergo experiences of

marginalisation and ‘Othering.’ Some Australian-born third generation Muslims struggle to gain general recognition as valued citizens of Australia and their Muslim dress style self-identity is often under public scrutiny.

This paper argues that young Muslims have a developed capacity to negotiate through depoliticised, hybrid and contextualised identities in multicultural and multi-faith Australia. However, it seems that unequal burden has been placed on them to prove their loyalty to Australia by suggesting they could dilute their Islamic identity and increase their contribution to social cohesion through an effort to openly integrate so to give priority to secular values and standards over religious and cultural ones. They are pressured to bridge the so-called cultural ‘divide’ because at times they are erroneously treated as a homogenous group due to outside influences. In multicultural and multi-faith Australia, religion is not just a private affair but an integral part of public space and young Muslim identity needs to be placed and recognised in this context.

MUSLIMS AND ISLAM IN AUSTRALIA

Muslim presence in Australia predates British settlement. Until recent times, this reality was rarely if ever mentioned or discussed. Gary Bouma confirms this when he states, “Islam in Australia is represented by relatively recently arrived immigrant communities.”¹ Muslims have been linked with Australia way before the arrival of British settlers when Macassan Muslims and Aboriginals interacted with each other frequently through trade and cultural exchange. In this regard, Andrew Jakubowicz notes, “It is feasible that ships from the fleet of the Chinese Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng reached Australia’s north coast in the fifteenth century CE.”² Nahid Kabir in her research found that some historical documents exist that link Muslims with Australia even before the 15th century.³ Considering this she concludes that Muslims had contact with Aboriginals perhaps as early as the 14th century.⁴ Importantly, in her work Peta Stephenson established it was the Macassan traders and fishermen from the south-western corner of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi who used to make seasonal trips to *Marege* (an Aboriginal term denoting ‘wild country’) on the north and north-west coastlines of Australia looking for *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumbers).⁵ This contact is further proof that Muslims were on the Australian continent well before the British. This is corroborated by Regina Ganter who asserts, “That Macassan contact predates the arrival of the British on the Australian continent is not disputed.”⁶

¹ Gary Bouma, *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia* (Canberra: Bureau of Immigration and Population Research/Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), 87.

² Andrew Jakubowicz, “Political Islam and the Future of Australian Multiculturalism,” *National Identities and Diversities* 9, no. 3 (2007): 266.

³ Nahid Kabir, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Peta Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming: Indigenous Muslims in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010).

⁶ Regina Ganter, “Muslim Australians: The Deep Histories of Contact,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 32, no. 4 (2008): 483.

Bêche-de-mer are marine invertebrates, which have high demand in Chinese markets on account of their culinary and medicinal value and assumed aphrodisiac qualities. The evidence of the influence of Indonesian Macassan trepangers can be found in the customary practices of some Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory. Ganter says that Indonesian Muslim trepangers “left profound imprints on the cultures and languages of [the Aboriginal peoples of] the far north shores.”⁷ Peta Stephenson, a cross-culturalist, observes that:

Indigenous and Muslim people traded, socialised and intermarried in this country decades before its white ‘discovery’ and settlement...Above all, Indigenous engagement with Islam has bequeathed to Australia a largely unknown human heritage in the form of memories, precious belongings, bicultural or multicultural identities and spiritual identifications that continue to be proudly invoked by descendants across the country.⁸

Macassan fishers did not visit Australia in large numbers and their visits were often brief, although they intermarried with Aboriginals.⁹ They do not seem to have a long-term plan to reside in Australia and due to this they never formed a fully structured community and made only irregular and localised impact on Australian social and cultural life at the time.¹⁰

Apart from Macassan fishers, Malay pearl-shellshellers regularly traded with Aboriginal people. This trade relationship lasted from the late 18th to the early 19th centuries and, similar to the Macassan experience, it led to the development of conjugal ties and resulted in Islam having a lasting influence on Aboriginal communities.¹¹ The result of such close bonds witnessed many Aboriginal people converting to Islam and evidence of this is in Aboriginal names such as Hassan, Doolah and Khan – names that are deeply entrenched in Islamic cultural norms. The arrival of the British in 1788 ended any hope for Macassan and Malay Muslim communal development in Australia.¹²

Once British colonialists established themselves in Australia, they began to bring in Afghan cameleers to Australia from the 1860s to the 1930s. They were commonly called the ‘Ghans’ (shortened from Afghans). Jakubowicz observes that “Muslim Afghans, Pushto and Dari speakers from the north-western provinces of British India had been brought to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century as cameleers in support of European exploration and communication.”¹³ The Ghan population gradually grew with the arrival of Durranie Afghans, Tareen Afghans, Pishorie Afghans, Punjabi Indians and Bengali Indians.¹⁴ Among the Afghans

⁷ Ibid., 482.

⁸ Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming*, 21-22.

⁹ John Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga, *Prehistory of Australia* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Bilal Cleland, “The history of Muslims in Australia,” in *Muslim Communities in Australia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001).

¹¹ Jan Ali, *Islamic Revivalism Encounters the Modern World: A Study of the Tabligh Jama'at* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2012).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jakubowicz, “Political Islam,” 266.

¹⁴ Katy Nebhan, “Identifications: Between Nationalistic ‘Cells’ and an Australian Muslim Ummah,” *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 4 (1999).

were some Indians, Egyptians, Iraqis, Syrians and Turkish but they were all known as Ghans.¹⁵ Since their arrival, these Ghans played a crucial role over many decades in facilitating British exploration of the country's desert centre. They serviced the Australian inland pastoral industry by hauling goods and transferring wool bales by camel trains and established trade and communication routes,¹⁶ and helped develop Australia's interior.¹⁷ As Ghans were engaged in this, in the process they also formed small Muslim communities that came to be known as 'Ghantowns.'¹⁸

In comparison to the Macassan Muslims, the Ghans with their comparatively higher numbers made a much larger and lasting impact on Australia's religious diversity as they were the first Muslims in Australia to institutionalise Islam. They built the first mosque in Marree in northern South Australia in 1882 then a 'Ghantown' mosque in Broken Hill in outback New South Wales, which has survived to this day but turned into a museum managed by the Broken Hill Historic Society.¹⁹ Other mosques were built by Afghans in Adelaide in 1890, Perth in 1904 and Brisbane in 1907 – all of which continue to be used by Muslims today.²⁰

The presence of Ghans and their initiative to build mosques represented the tangible existence of Islam in Australia. However, unfortunately for them, the development of Australia's interior, the building of railways in the country's desert centre and the introduction of the utility truck gradually killed the camel-carrying industry.²¹ When the *White Australia Act* came into law in 1901, the fate of the Ghans and their religion was sealed, leading to their gradual decline and the virtual disappearance of Islam in Australia.

MUSLIM MASS MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

It was around the time when the policies that restricted the immigration of non-Europeans to Australia were phased out in the late 1960s that mass Muslim migration began. Prior to this, due to *Immigration Restriction Act*, a small number of Albanians – former citizens of the Ottoman Empire – arrived in the 1920s and 1930s,²² Muslim Malay inhabitants of the Indian Ocean's Cocos or Keeling Islands arrived in 1955,²³ Turkish Cypriots arrived in the 1950s and

¹⁵ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Unity or Fragmentation?" in *Muslim Communities in Australia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Abdalla Mograby, "Muslim Migration and Settlement: The Australian Experience," in *Islam in Australia*, (Sydney: Middle East Research and Information Section/NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 1985).

¹⁷ Pamela Rajkowski, *In the Tracks of the Camelmen* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1987), 167.

¹⁸ Akbarzadeh, "Unity or Fragmentation?"

¹⁹ Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques & Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Cameldrivers in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁰ Qazi Ahmad, "Islam and Muslims in Australia," in *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State: Case-Studies of Muslims in Thirteen Countries*, ed. Hussin Mutalib and Taj ul-Islam Hashmi (New York: St Martins Press, 1994).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Anthony Johns and Abdullah Saeed, "Muslims in Australia: The Building of a Community," in *Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

²³ Garry Trompf, ed., *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: Transoceanic Comparisons of New Religious Movements (Religion and Society)* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990).

60s, followed by the arrival of more mainly Turkish immigrants between 1968 and 1972.²⁴ Then came Lebanese Muslims who constituted the largest Muslim community in Australia by early 1970s and they continued to grow due to displacement caused by the Lebanese Civil War in 1975.²⁵ Between 1950 and 1975, Australia experienced an increase in the Muslim population among whom were many professionals and skilled personnel, such as “teachers and engineers from Egypt, doctors from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, and tertiary students from Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.”²⁶

The last quarter of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century witnessed a significant and steady increase in Muslim population. In 1971, there were only 22,311 Muslims²⁷ living in Australia but today there are 813,392 Muslims (3.2 per cent of the Australian population)²⁸ in Australia.

Australian Muslims largely live in three main populated states of Australia. The state of New South Wales has the largest Muslim population at 3.4%²⁹ followed by Victoria with a close second at 4.2%³⁰ then finally Queensland at 1.2%.³¹ The Muslim population is diverse and, according to Riaz Hassan, “altogether Australian Muslims came from 183 countries, making them one of the most ethnically and nationally heterogeneous communities in Australia.”³² The data from the 2021 Australian census has been used to gain some insight into the diversity of the Muslim population. Table 1 gives this information.

²⁴ Michael Humphrey, “An Australian Islam? Religion in the Multicultural City,” in *Muslim Communities in Australia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001).

²⁵ Mona Omar, “Architecture, Culture and Needs of Australian Muslim Communities: Challenges and Opportunities for Social Inclusion,” *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 3 (2016): 1396; Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

²⁶ Ahmad, “Islam and Muslims in Australia,” 318.

²⁷ Halim Rane et al., “Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents,” *Religions* 11, no.8 (2020): 2.

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2021 Census Shows Changes in Australia’s Religious Diversity,” Media Release, June 28, 2022, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-shows-changes-australias-religious-diversity>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Riaz Hassan, *Australian Muslims: A Demographic, Social and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia* (Adelaide: International Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, 2015), 19.

Table 1: Top 20 source countries of birth of Australian Muslim population, 2021

No.	Country of birth	Muslims	% of Muslim population
1	Australia	318,415	39.1
2	Pakistan	82,603	10.2
3	Afghanistan	56,361	6.9
4	Bangladesh	43,359	5.3
5	Lebanon	39,408	4.8
6	India	28,104	3.5
7	Turkey	26,072	3.2
8	Iraq	23,593	2.9
9	Iran	21,357	2.6
10	Indonesia	16,841	2.1
11	Malaysia	11,633	1.4
12	Egypt	9,711	1.2
13	Syria	8,807	1.1
14	Saudi Arabia	8,285	1.0
15	Fiji	8,168	1.0
16	Somalia	7,718	0.9
17	Bosnia and Herzegovina	7,121	0.9
18	Not stated	6,818	0.8
19	New Zealand	4,922	0.6
20	Sudan	4,646	0.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census³³

Like other world religions – Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism – Islam has various groups and subgroups. ‘Sunnis’ who regard themselves as followers of the traditions of Prophet Muḥammad and of the first two generations of the community of Muslims constitute the main Islamic group with an estimate world population of 85%.³⁴ In Australia, the situation is similar with Sunni Muslims constituting around 90% of Muslim population and Shias making up less than 10% of Muslims.³⁵ Shia Muslims are known as the ‘party of Ali’ who consider the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Ṭalib, to be his rightful successor and that the Muslim community should be led by a nominated descendant from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of

³³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2021 4-digit level BPLP Country of Birth of Person by 4-digit level RELP Religious Affiliation* [Census TableBuilder], accessed November 1, 2023, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/microdata-tablebuilder>.

³⁴ “Sunnis and Shia: Islam’s Ancient Schism,” BBC NEWS, January 4, 2016, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709>.

³⁵ Pew Research Center, “Estimated Percentage Range of Shia by Country,” in *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, ed. Sandra Stencel, Andrea Useem, Tracy Miller and Sara Tisdale (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009), accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2009/10/Shiarange.pdf>.

Prophet Muḥammad). This separation of Muslims into Sunnis and Shias is known as a sectarian division in Islam and originally materialised after the death of Prophet Muḥammad over the question of Muslim leadership. Muslims are further divided, from Sunni and Shia camps, along ideological, theological and jurisprudential lines, extremely complicating Islamic diversity. Some Muslims belong to a theological or legal school, some link themselves to a particular group with the aim to align religious teachings with contemporary issues or vice versa, and some pledge allegiance to groups that focus on how one should interpret religious texts, including the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* (books of Prophetic traditions). Some divisions are based on political matters while others are founded on theological or spiritual differences. These divisions are further complicated by separation along ethnic, parochial, linguistic and national lines. Due to these factors, Muslims in most parts of the world, including in Australia, are not a homogeneous people.³⁶

These different factors – ethnic, parochial, national, theological and jurisprudential as well as modern, secular and capitalist – make for a complex entity and Muslim identity a multi-level and complicated structural phenomenon. Muslim identity in Australia, however, is always deeply rooted in religion – Islam – as it is one of the principal mechanisms of socialisation, recognition of their belonging and values identity.³⁷ The development of a Muslim identity in Australia is influenced by social situations where Muslims are part of a minority group living in a multicultural and multi-faith modern secular state. Islamic identity is actualised, while other levels of identity are suppressed or subordinated. While migrant Muslims protect themselves from losing their religious values, young Muslims react in a similar way but they also include this as an expression of their citizenship right.³⁸ As Australian born, young Muslims see Australia as their home in which they exercise their democratic and citizenship rights to express themselves religiously.

Young Muslims, males and females, with the power of their democratic and citizenship rights are actively involved in the broader Australian socio-cultural, economic and political landscape. Many young Muslims are running their own businesses and socio-cultural events and programs and engaging in politics. For example, Talal Yassine is the Crescent Wealth Managing Director, Waleed Aly is a radio commentator and television presenter, Usman Khawaja is an Australian cricketer, Ali Banat was an Australian businessman who became humanitarian philanthropist, Anisa Khan is a prominent entrepreneur, Fatima Payman is Australia's first hijab-wearing Muslim senator, Ahmed Hassan is a Melbourne-based eye surgeon, Ramzi Elsayed is a co-founder of Young Muslims Australia, Toltu Tufa is an activist working as a cross-cultural educator and community worker, Manar Etchelebi is a primary school teacher, Life Saving Victoria Ambassador, Girl Guides Coordinator and an executive officer for the Australian Council for Islamic Education in Schools, and Monique Toohey is a

³⁶ Jan Ali, "Muslims as Archetypal Suspect Citizens in Australia," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 3 (2020).

³⁷ Shaheen Whyte and Salih Yucel. "Australian Muslim Identities and the Question of Intra-Muslim Dialogue," *Religions* 14 (2023).

³⁸ Adis Duderija, "Emergence of Western Muslim Identity," in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, ed. Roberto Tottoli (New York: Routledge, 2014).

consultant psychologist and owner of Muslim focused psychological counselling service – *Nasihah Consulting*.

All this does not mean that Muslims do not face some difficulties. Far from it, Muslims still struggle for recognition and equality and there is a long way to go yet. In this climate, Muslim identity dramatically changes its configuration and demonstrates inclusion and exclusion. Muslim identity is combined with other levels of identity and complexities and, in the next two sections, I discuss this in some depth exploring some specific features.

MUSLIM IDENTITY AND ITS SOURCES

Identity is an important sociological phenomenon that is influenced by many factors such as cultural background, religious beliefs, class status, education, social conflict, wars, economic conditions and political views. Identity is formed in a social context through social interaction and is built over time. Identity formation is never constant and always evolving with the passing of time. Identity is based on the attributes, beliefs, values, traits, appearances, personality and expressions that characterise an individual or group. Identity guides individual behavior, causing a person to behave in certain ways according to societal expectations such as a “nurse” who acts like a “nurse” – caring and compassionate. An individual’s personal identity tells us who a person is and their social identity reveals who they are in relation to the group to which the individual belongs. Social identity groups are usually defined by some physical and social characteristics of individuals who constitute the group. In sociology, emphasis is placed on collective identity where a person’s identity is understood to be intimately connected to role-behaviour or their membership to the group that defines the individual.³⁹

All social groups have norms and beliefs about acceptable identity. Individuals need to belong to a particular social group or several social groups and they take part of their identity from socialising in the group. Muslim youth living in a multicultural and multi-faith Australia form their identity from their cultural and religious background and from living in the society where they are active members.

Identity is a sociological condition related to the social process and an individual’s understanding of themselves living in a particular society. People from various ethnic backgrounds can develop a sense of kinship with their host nation through integration into the dominant culture. This gives them a feeling of acceptance and acknowledgement where the expression of identity can be single, dual or multiple. Identity is always malleable and in a process of being formed.⁴⁰

Research on Muslim identity has gained momentum since the turn of the 21st century throughout the world. Major global events have seen movements of many people from Muslim backgrounds to other countries around the world including Australia. A further complication

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nahid Kabir, “Australian Muslim Citizens: Questions of Inclusion and Exclusion, 2006–2020,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2020).

arises when Muslim minorities are faced by the question of religious identification as they live in the dominant non-Muslim Western culture. Living as a minority in a country inevitably produces issues about personal identity for Muslims.⁴¹ Despite these difficulties, the structure of Islamic identity is currently crucial to the development of the new identity. Scholars examining Muslim identity use two main approaches to come to an understanding of Muslim identity. They use a reductionist approach or accommodating approach to explain issues influencing identity.⁴²

The reductionist approach to Muslim identity oversimplifies the true nature of Muslim identity and can be used by neo-conservatives to negatively portray Muslim identity for their purposes. Their approach is a top-down solution that does not accommodate the individuals', communities' and societies' tendencies, needs and expectations.⁴³ Reductionists aim to isolate or demonise Muslim identity. However, a transformational change requires a great deal of prior groundwork that will be accepted and taken on by all sections of society. They are fixed in the nostalgia of Islamic civilisation's past glories and stress the successful episodes of the past so much that they do not accept a gradual transformation; rather, they seek a radical solution that does not allow any flexibility and does not cater for the needs of the broader community.

The accommodating approach holds that multi-layers and various affiliations in varying degrees and settings are unavoidable and essential. Similar to language, identity is a dynamic process that cannot be limited by specific terms or compared to other elements inside itself. It is so essential to accept and value each component while also mediating and harmonising within oneself.⁴⁴ Identity formation has two strands involving self-identity perception and how identity is recognised by others in larger majority social groups.⁴⁵ The majority of Muslims globally is connected to the greater Muslim world community or *ummah* (community of believers) and provides them with local, national and international discourse. Muslim youth are part of the greater Muslim community and their identity formation relates to this broader Muslim community and the society where they live. The accommodating approach is inclusive and has numerous possibilities where Muslims combine and disclose various loyalties and bicultural skills that are part of multiple worlds.⁴⁶

For Muslim youth, their identity is of great importance and this can be complicated by the issue of secularism and rise of postcolonialism in Muslim countries. The unforeseeable impacts of parental upbringing over the second generation result in different formulations within the Muslim-ethnic-national identity of second- and third-generation Muslims.⁴⁷ However, Phalet

⁴¹ Tariq Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim* (London: Kube Publishing, 2010).

⁴² Derya Iner and Salih Yucel, eds., *Muslim Identity Formation in Religiously Diverse Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Nahid Kabir, "A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity: The Melbourne Case," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2011).

⁴⁷ Karen Phalet, Fenella Fleischmann and Snezana Stojcic, "Ways of 'being Muslim': Religious Identities of Second-Generation Turks," in *The European Second Generation Compared: Does the Integration Context*

et al. claim the overall conclusion from those formulations demonstrates that religion plays a substantial role with local born Muslims' sense of self and forming their identity.⁴⁸ The question of identity for Muslim youth is not only influenced by their parents' or grandparents' country of origin but also by the Western country where they are born. As young Muslims are born in a country such as Australia, they are part of their new home country and it is only logical for them to see the value in taking an accommodating approach in order not to lose their religious identity and continue to be part of their cultural community.

Ramadan makes a valuable point that Muslim identity in Western societies is important to non-Muslim majorities as well.⁴⁹ Muslims have a reputation for being resistant to assimilation and even the phrase 'integration' suggests that Muslims desire to withdraw from society. This view is incorrect as Muslims in a democratic Western country like Australia believe they can contribute positively to the society in which they live.⁵⁰ The public's concern is frequently increased by the media's inaccurate portrayals of Muslims and ignorance about Muslim culture, traditions and religious belief and values.⁵¹ A further complication occurs when Muslim youth are exposed to reductionist ideology. This ideology is exclusivist and Muslim youth feel they will not be accepted by the Western society if they follow reductionist logic.

Portrayals of Muslims need to take into consideration how young Muslims construct their identity in their Western country. There are also academics who think a Western Muslim identity has already materialised. Adis Duderija's paper "Emergence of Western Muslim Identity" is of particular significance for this discussion.⁵² According to Duderija, religion is extremely important to migrants' sense of self, particularly if they are members of a minority group.⁵³ He makes the important claim that, in contrast to Muslims who have just immigrated, Muslims who are born in the West create distinctive identities by reassessing Islam in the socio-cultural milieu in which they live. There are numerous identities evolving, such as the "neo-traditional" identity and the "Progressive Muslim" identity, which is a crucial distinction in Duderija's theory.⁵⁴ Duderija's approach and his understanding are progressive, inclusive and practical.

From a theoretical perspective, Joshua Roose and Anita Harris contend that Australian Muslim adolescents take advantage of opportunities to interact with others in society despite their doubts about their feeling of belonging and awareness of unfavourable political and public attitudes towards Muslims.⁵⁵ Their research revealed that religion was the "key shaper of the everyday civic activities," with Islam greatly influencing young Australian Muslims' growth

Matter? ed. Maurice Crul, Jens Schneider and Frans Lelie (Amsterdam: The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim*.

⁵⁰ Kabir, "A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity."

⁵¹ Ali, "Muslims as Archetypal Suspect Citizens in Australia."

⁵² Duderija, "Emergence of Western Muslim Identity."

⁵³ Ibid., 202.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 211.

⁵⁵ Joshua Roose and Anita Harris, "Muslim Citizenship in Everyday Australian Civic Spaces," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36, no. 4 (2015).

of civic mindedness.⁵⁶ Their findings suggest that Muslim youth civic involvement is strongly influenced by religion. There is a need to understand how Australian Muslim youth relate to alternative forms of civic practise to demonstrate their active participation in society. They argue that an understanding of civic engagement cannot be limited to traditional civic activities.

Amelia Johns and her study on Muslim young people's active citizenship online found that Muslim youth participate in civic practises; however, the majority do so through online platforms.⁵⁷ Active citizenship helps build a positive identity for young Muslims. According to Johns' research, Muslim youth now have more options than ever before to participate in civic participation and collective agency thanks to new internet platforms and social media. These online forums are essential for allowing young Muslims in Australia to speak up and share their concerns about rights, citizenship and other matters that affect the Muslim community. Similar to Roose and Harris, Johns demonstrates that civic involvement need not always be focused on formal political membership and participation. Rather, civic participation refers to any activity focused on "public welfare."⁵⁸

According to Peucker and Akbarzadeh, after 11 September, there was a sharp rise in active citizenship, with a majority of Australian Muslims participating in interfaith efforts, the media and government discussions.⁵⁹ They back up their claims with analysis of the 2001, 2006 and 2011 Australian census data, which demonstrates that, despite the growing radicalisation discourse, younger Australian Muslims are more motivated to become active citizens than their older counterparts. This motivation assists the positive self-image of young Muslims. The majority of younger Australian Muslims reject any political radical view arguments and use their positive Muslim identity in an accommodating manner⁶⁰ so they can be active members of the broader Western community.

Omar adds to the debate, noting one of the main issues facing Muslim youth in Australia is that they feel the broader Australian community does not understand who they are and what they believe in.⁶¹ Omar suggests there is some evidence that the non-Muslim community does not accept or understand Muslim youth. Other Muslim youth question whether it is possible to change the unfavourable perceptions of Muslims in general. However, for Muslim youth, it is important to portray themselves as tolerant and democratic so they are perceived by the broader society as valued members of the society.⁶²

⁵⁶ Ibid., 483.

⁵⁷ Amelia Johns, "Muslim Young People Online: 'Acts of Citizenship' in Socially Networked Spaces," *Social Inclusion* 2, no. 2 (2014).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁹ Mario Peucker and Shahram Akbarzadeh. *Active Muslim citizenship in the West* (London/New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶⁰ Mirela Cufurovic and Mehmet Ozalp. "Religion, Belonging, and Active Citizenship: A Systematic Review of Literature on Muslim Youth in Australia," *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021); Iner and Yucel, *Muslim Identity Formation*.

⁶¹ Omar, "Architecture, Culture and Needs of Australian Muslim Communities."

⁶² Ali, "Muslims as Archetypal Suspect Citizens in Australia."

From another viewpoint, Bectovic examines the identity issue, its complexity and the development of the identity process.⁶³ Bectovic refers to the many ways Muslims organise themselves as collective groups and the way that people in these various social groups relate to Islam. His discussion illustrates there are multiple Western Muslim identities with their accompanying social groups and communities.⁶⁴

Further to this discussion, Ramadan argues that nationality relates to the nation where a person lives and where they are part of the broader society.⁶⁵ Ramadan adds that nothing in Islamic texts prohibits a Muslim from being a genuine citizen of Western countries such as the United States or United Kingdom. This positive view gives credence to the concept of a citizen able to live as a Western Muslim. There are many examples in Australia today where young Muslims are positive role models and valued citizens, which will be explored in depth below.

Literature on Muslim youth has been greatly influenced by the important concept of belonging. Many academics concentrate on how Muslim young people manage their ‘many identities’ in a culture that may or may not be strongly opposed to their commitment to Islam.⁶⁶ According to Hamad, Muslim youth in the West constantly negotiate between a variety of forms of identification in addition to their Islamic beliefs and Western ideals.⁶⁷ They find themselves at the epicentre of discussions in which race, class and international politics and nationality are projected on them. He contends that top-down methods of understanding Muslim youth identity in the West is not needed. The paper by Hosseini offers a useful alternative explanation of how Muslim youth experience belonging and agency in the West. He describes Muslim young people as “actors with a range of opportunities where they can practise their political agency and respond to their situations in multiple ways” despite “multiple influential forces and factors” like marginalisation, unemployment, racism, etc.⁶⁸

Some studies show that many Muslim youth in the West and in Australia feel a strong sense of connection to their respective Western countries.⁶⁹ Research by Nahid Kabir shows the majority of Australian Muslims living in Melbourne said that to be Australian is to respect the law and to be un-Australian is to disobey the law.⁷⁰ While this shows that Muslims pay attention to being law-abiding citizens, nothing is said about the social and religious aspects of a person’s national identity as Australian. Kabir presents an insider’s view of how Muslim young people

⁶³ Safet Bectovic, “Studying Muslims and Constructing Islamic Identity,” in *Methods and Contexts in the Study of Muslim Minorities: Visible and Invisible Muslims*, ed. Nadia Jeldtoff and Jorgen Lielsen (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶⁶ Kabir, “A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity”; Mehmet Ozalp and Kulsoom Siddiqui, “Youth Identity Formation in the Presence of the ‘Other’: Reflections on Being Young and Muslim in an Interfaith Setting,” in *Women in Islam: Reflections on Historical and Contemporary Research*, ed. Terence Lovat (New York: Springer, 2012); Andrew Jakubowicz et al., “Minority Youth and Social Transformation in Australia: Identities, Belonging and Cultural Capital,” *Social Inclusion* 2, no. 2 (2014).

⁶⁷ Hamad Hosseini, “‘Political Identity’ of Muslim Youth in Western Diaspora: Towards an Integrative Research Agenda,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2013): 465.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 469.

⁶⁹ Cufurovic and Ozalp, “Religion, Belonging, and Active Citizenship.”

⁷⁰ Kabir, “A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity.”

feel about practising their religion in the West and this sheds light on how Muslim young people in Australia are not alienated from their country and its principles.⁷¹

According to Lam and Mansouri, Muslim youth had difficulties with their Muslim identity as they live in a society that is largely non-Muslim.⁷² There is a complexity of Muslim identities, aspirations and civic and political engagement. There is often a failure to recognise the rights of Muslim youth within prevailing structures of modern society and misconceptions about their social acceptance in society.

However, Puecker has a more positive approach and looked at how Muslims in Australia and Germany are active in a non-Muslim civil society, within their community and in politics.⁷³ The study was based on in-depth interviews with 30 Muslims who identified themselves as being active in a range of civic activities and political organisations. From this study, Peucker demonstrates that, rather than making barriers of self-segregation, Muslim community-based activity has encouraged trust-based networks across communities, creating a bridging and linking social capital.⁷⁴ This results in a greater sense of civic efficacy, engaged citizenship and opened doors for political participation.

Richard Bulliet goes a step further and presents a different perspective on how the West and Islam interact. He makes a compelling case examining historical interaction between Islam and Christian civilisations.⁷⁵ If historical and cultural facts are examined in greater detail, it becomes clear that Western civilisation has interacted with Islam and shared intellectual, cultural and economic beliefs far more readily than it ever did with Judaism and the Greeks. Bulliet believes that, because of this, Western civilisation should be referred to as Islamo-Christian.⁷⁶

Bennett debates whether Muslims should be understood as a single monolithic social group or as a diverse, multi-layered group. This is a question that needs to be considered when talking about Muslim identity.⁷⁷ When assessing Muslim societies, observers usually choose one of these approaches to explain Muslim identity. If Muslims are viewed as a singular, monolithic group, they are all labelled as the same regardless of geography and time. This perception of Muslims being a monolithic group is negative and has been used by reductionists to justify their radical views.⁷⁸

Similarly, a simplistic view was commonly held by Orientalists in the pre-globalised world and influenced much of modern Western philosophy. Edward Said argues that the West

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Kim Lam and Fethi Mansour, "Beyond (Mis-)Recognition: Muslim Youth and Religiosity in Australia," *Journal of Youth Studies* 24, no. 6 (2021).

⁷³ Mario Peucker, "Muslims in Australia and Germany: Demographics, Resources, Citizenship," in *Muslim Citizenship in Liberal Democracies: Civic and Political Participation in the West*, ed. Mario Peucker (Berlin: Springer 2016).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilisation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Clinton Bennett, *Muslims and Modernity: An Introduction to the Issues and Debates* (London: Continuum, 2015).

⁷⁸ Iner and Yucel, *Muslim Identity Formation*.

perceives Islam and Muslims as stagnant entities that do not develop but stay the same.⁷⁹ The traditional Orientalist approach is uncomplicated and identifies commonality and persistent patterns among all Muslims. However, as Said points out, such a monolithic approach discounts the visible diversity in the Muslim world and cannot explain why such diversity exists.

Adding to this, Hosseini states that young Muslims are still commonly regarded by the media and public as a static homogenous group.⁸⁰ He further believes that Western values and identity make it difficult for young Muslims to feel they belong to Western society without compromising their Islamic beliefs. There is a need to ensure Muslim youth are not alienated by being labelled as a homogenous, static and inflexible group.

Dunn et al. conducted a survey that confirmed the majority of Australian Muslims are well integrated into Australian society. Most of the respondents indicated they often interact with non-Muslims in the workplace and educational settings.⁸¹ Their survey found that Australian Muslims' engagement in cross-cultural interactions is positive and assists their sense of belonging and their attitudes about integration. The more Australian Muslims interact with non-Muslims in social and educational settings, the more they felt as citizens of Australia. Dunn et al. found positive evidence that young Muslims are successfully integrated into the broader community as part of an accommodating style.

Dunn et al. also found that most Australian Muslims surveyed agreed it is positive for a society to consist of people from different cultures.⁸² Acceptance of multiculturalism and equality by Australian Muslims challenges the notion that Muslims are incompatible with Western values and beliefs. However, racism is regarded as a serious issue by around 10 per cent of Australian Muslims.⁸³ In the broader Australian community, Australians report they do not experience much racism. As the dominant culture, this is not surprising. Muslims with stronger levels of religiosity or who have more conservative traditional dress experience higher levels of racism.⁸⁴

Furthermore, some Muslim youth may find it difficult to be active citizens, especially when it comes to contributing back to society in the workforce. In her study of 18 young job-seeking Australian Muslims, Pam Nilan discovered that Muslim youth in the suburbs of Western Sydney found it difficult to acquire a job because they were "regarded with mistrust because of their Muslim background, ethnicity, accent, and/or appearance."⁸⁵ Nilan also discovered the

⁷⁹ John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

⁸⁰ Hosseini, "Political Identity."

⁸¹ Kevin Dunn et al., *The Resilience and Ordinariness of Australian Muslims: Attitudes and Experiences of Muslims Report* (Sydney, Australia: Western Sydney University and ISRA Australia, 2015), accessed August 26, 2022, http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/990129/Sydney_Muslims_report.pdf.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Pam Nilan, "Young, Muslim and Looking for a Job in Australia," *Youth Studies Australia* 31, no. 1 (2011): 57.

issue of unemployment affects the larger young population in Australia in general, not just Muslim youth.⁸⁶

Many scholars have contributed to the study and analysis of Muslim identity and to problems experienced by Muslim youth in forming their identity. Research suggests there are several layers to Muslim identity and not one homogenous group. Western democratic societies often misunderstand Muslim identity although in practice Muslims contribute to society and are law abiding citizens.

Therefore, creating a Muslim identity that is comfortable for young Muslims is in the best interests of all Muslims and their continued presence in the nations where they live. Their identity should not, however, be incompatible with or alien to the community in which they live and recognise young Muslims as fellow citizens. Young Muslims need to feel free to embrace and practice their religion as valued members of the society.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF YOUNG MUSLIM IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIA

One topic that is debated and addressed the most in the current period is identity. Since globalisation has made physical borders easily crossable, human identity stands as the sole border of individual and in-group formation. The effects of globalisation, such as loss of territory, mass migration and destabilisation, have no doubt shaken the old, stable and simple formulas of identity formation.

We learn from the literature that at a general level the process of globalisation and enrichment of the multicultural and multi-faith space of Australia coupled with the constantly changing conditions of modernity have made the identity structure undergo increased erosion, losing its stability and homogeneity. There is a strong scholarly view that the change in the principles of self-identification has led to a transformation in the identity of the entire society paving the way for the spread of the multi-level identity practice. From the discussion above, we have seen that Muslims in Australia, like elsewhere, have multiple identities. They practice their identity in a variety of ways because many factors influenced their identity formation. The family, community, patterns of socialisation, ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, gender, socio-economic status, and religion are some of the factors behind Muslim identity formation. As a result of these factors, Muslims are variously identified within and outside their communities as secular Muslims, modern Muslims, liberal Muslims, traditional Muslims, young Muslims, Turkish Muslims, Lebanese Muslims, immigrant Muslims, wealthy Muslims, educated Muslims, unemployed Muslims, urban Muslims, regional Muslims, cultural Muslims, religious Muslims, radical Muslims and so forth.

The literature shows that, despite public resistance and political manoeuvring, Muslims in Australia, particularly young Muslims, can negotiate multiple levels of identity where they are able to identify with one or more types of identity. The different levels of identity complement each other, enabling Muslims to pursue life in Australia in similar ways to the rest of the

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Australian population, which is internally diverse. The Muslim identity is never fixed and is in a state of constant flux and what these identity labels mean differs from person to person and group to group based on prevailing circumstances and experiences.⁸⁷ However, for Muslims in general, it is their Islamic identity that supersedes other levels of identity.⁸⁸ The literature suggests that identity of Australian Muslims is a concentrated expression of the Islamic worldview developed during personal spiritual self-determination as well as under the influence of important external factors, such as the state of religious life of the surrounding community, transformation of the socio-cultural, economic and political environment, and patterns of socialisation or certain life situations relating to the social context. Considering this, when Australian Muslims engage in the process of self-identification, they do so with full awareness of the importance and necessity of preserving their religious identity.

In a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith society like Australia, research⁸⁹ shows that Muslim identity is often linked, according to the norm of complementarity, with other levels of identity, namely ethnicity, nationality, gender, age and socio-economic status. This kind of identity indicates the ability of Muslims to respond meaningfully to the expectations of people with which they interact without compromising the principles of acceptable behaviour in Islam. For Muslims to preserve their Muslim identity, it has been established⁹⁰ that they maintain a stable relationship with a religious organisation by visiting a mosque, engaging with a *sheikh* (Muslim scholar) and interacting with fellow believers. They bring their lifestyle into compliance with the mandatory requirements of the religion they believe in – Islam.

Referring to the literature, when we cast our attention to young Muslims in Australia, their experience is dissimilar, in many ways, to those of Muslim immigrants. What young Muslims experience in Australia is a complex process and how they construct their identity to project their individual ontology cannot be explained simply. The task of explaining the lived experience and the complex process of identity construction of young Australian Muslims requires a multifaceted and critical analysis. For this, the paper is inadequate; therefore, what follows is a brief analysis of the severity and intensity of the Islamic worldview that determines the development of young Australian Muslim identity and how “Othering” of young Australian Muslims has some major consequences on their identity construction with their community and in mainstream society.

I posit that the formation of Australian young Muslims’ identity is heavily influenced by an Islamic worldview. We know from the literature that many young Australian Muslims draw inspiration from their religion and its scriptures – the Qur’ān (Muslim holy book) and *ḥadīth* (Prophetic traditions). Thus, the observance of Islamic ritual practices and embracing of Islamic cultural norms and values are often high among young Australian Muslims.⁹¹ This is because of the places where young Australian Muslims acquire their Islamic knowledge and

⁸⁷ Kabir, “A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity.”

⁸⁸ Duderija, “Emergence of Western Muslim Identity.”

⁸⁹ Iner and Yucel, *Muslim Identity Formation*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Joshua Roose, “Young Muslims of Australia: Anatomy of a Multicultural Success Story,” *The La Trobe Journal* 89 (2012).

develop a ‘purified’ identity. Roose observes, this spiritual development is central to the young Australian Muslim.⁹² Ramzi Elsayed claims that “a strong spiritual grounding was the best legacy you can give [to young Muslims] and that everything was (and is) about a connection to God and with a focus on pleasing God.”⁹³ In light of this, religious identity, at the expense of ethnic-parochial identity, is seen by young Australian Muslims to be more meaningful and essential. One way of describing them is ‘religious Muslims’ who have specific religious beliefs and actively share in its practices; therefore, they have a strong religious tendency. In this way ‘Muslim identity’ and ‘Islamic identity’ merge and become a single concept.

We learn that Muslim identity, therefore, is identical to an Islamic identity. ‘Muslimness’ is an ontological framework articulated and produced from belonging to the Islamic tradition, which becomes the basis of group solidarity, mobilisation and political positioning. Muslim identity is a religious identity, the construction of which can be shaped by religious institutions, organisations and associations, as we saw above. It can be deemed as an individual’s recognition of their belonging to Islam, its values and laws. Muslim identification is one of the main mechanisms of socialisation, especially for young Muslims, through the acquisition of the values, rules and practices of Islam. The main criterion of Muslim identity is the recognition of the values, norms and rules established in the scriptures and these make it possible to recognise an individual as a member of a single social community of Muslims – the *ummah*.

Young Australian Muslims are generally referred to as second- and third-generation Muslims who are born in Australia, acquired a good command of the language and gained sound understanding of the society, through schooling and socialisation.⁹⁴ They are directly involved in civic and political engagements, for example, organising and running social and community events, voting and running for council, state or federal elections. Given the globalisation of the media and pervasiveness of social media and popular culture, young Australian Muslims, like their Australian peers in general, pursue similar life goals such as finding secure permanent employment, aspiring to purchase their own house, taking overseas holiday trips and keeping up with new technologies. Also, like their Australian peers, they value liberal democracy, constitutionalism, parliamentarianism, equality, equity, human rights and justice. Young Australian Muslims, for instance, can be found running businesses, working as professionals such as lawyers, teachers, doctors, engineers and accountants, and being involved in Australian inventions, for example, inventing the burkini.

This paints a positive picture of Muslim youth experience in Australia. In this depiction, young Australian Muslims are seen as very much part and parcel of the various socio-cultural, economic and political processes and closely embedded in the civil society. They are seen as playing an important role in the overall functioning of the Australian society.

However, all this socialisation has been achieved after young Australian Muslims have undergone personal struggles and faced considerable socio-cultural and economic challenges,

⁹² Ibid., 160.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ali, “Muslims as Archetypal Suspect Citizens in Australia.”

which continues to this day.⁹⁵ Young Australian Muslims encounter numerous challenges on a regular basis. Roose et al. assert that:

Despite small gains in education and income between 2006 and 2016, our analysis indicates that Australian born Muslims in particular, are disproportionately affected by socio-economic disadvantages, compared both with Muslim communities as a whole and the Australian average. This ‘left behind’ status might be changed to a ‘left out’ status when it comes to key societal structures and opportunities. Reflecting a lack of redistribution, socio-economic upward mobility appears to be unobtainable for many. Despite demands for Muslims to meet the responsibilities of citizenship in a formal sense, including passing tests, abiding by rules and respecting difference, equality of opportunity is clearly not present.⁹⁶

Given their multiple identities and as they have come from an immigrant background, it has been shown that young Australian Muslims face many impediments because of who they are and what they represent, which is their religious and cultural identity. Despite being born in Australia, young Muslims are being seen as the ‘Other’ because of their religious belief; therefore, their overall status as a Muslim has often been problematic.⁹⁷ Young Australian Muslims invariably feel worried about being accepted in the broader society and at times they feel marginalised and misunderstood. In today’s climate, it has been revealed that young Australian Muslims are faced with a complex cultural milieu. The impact of 9/11 on the lives of particularly young Muslims in Australia has been important and includes misrepresentation in the media.⁹⁸ It has been proven that they are set up to be easily ‘Othered’.⁹⁹ This ‘Othering’ manifests in a variety of ways in Australian society, such as in television programs, which, for instance, focus on sleeper cells, racial profiling and even overrepresenting Muslims in news coverage. In response to the negative imagery of Muslims, Aly argues against the common understanding of a singular Muslim identity as monolithic, anti-West and resistant to secularism. She asserts:

In the Australian context, this discourse has emerged as one which implicates Australian Muslims, constructing them as a homogenous monolith with an underlying implication that Islam, and by association Australian Muslims, is secular resistant and at odds with the values of the liberal democratic state. Several textual analyses attest to the bias against Muslims in the popular Australian media discourse...anti-Muslim and the perception of the media as a powerful purveyor of public opinion has impacted on the construction of Australian Muslim identity.¹⁰⁰

Young Muslims from varied cultural origins and practices have been ‘Othered’ by mainstream Australia in the past and held captive to *Orientalist* misinterpretations and

⁹⁵ Kabir, “A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity.”

⁹⁶ Joshua Roose, Mario Peucker and Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Socio-Economic Disadvantages and Lack of Recognition: Impacts on Citizenship Within Australian Muslim Communities,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 43 (2022): 217.

⁹⁷ Ali, “Muslims as Archetypal Suspect Citizens in Australia.”

⁹⁸ Anne Aly, “Australian Muslim Responses to Discourse on Terrorism in the Australian Popular Media,” *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 42, no. 1 (2007).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 27.

portrayed as exotic or strange, which is sometimes perpetuated in the media.¹⁰¹ Following the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania where these events were dubbed “9/11,” young Australian Muslims in the past were often impacted by the responses and reactions of mainstream Australia.¹⁰² This viewpoint created a problem for young Australian Muslims because the events of 9/11 have transformed the socio-cultural landscape for Australian mainstream communities. While this viewpoint was upsetting for young Muslims, in recent times there has been greater understanding of the Muslim community in the broader community and political circles. The literature informs us that young Australian Muslims are compelled to negotiate multiple identities to be accepted as members of Australian society. They function in much the same way as the rest of the population observing the normative patterns of Australian daily living.

Numerous studies¹⁰³ have examined the ways exclusionary political discourses and the media have often articulated Muslims as the ‘Other,’ forcing particularly young Muslims to formulate their identities in such a manner that inevitably reinforces religion as the most prominent marker of identity.¹⁰⁴ Recent research has also shown that young Australian Muslims have been without adequate socio-economic resources and religious-cultural recognition along with an unequal burden to fully participate in the nation’s life and contribute to social cohesion. Young Muslims in Australia go to great effort “to explain, demystify and de-stigmatise Islam and Muslim identity through everyday knowledge-sharing.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, it is understood that young Australian Muslims live in an environment where their existence can have some problems with their social acceptance and they may be labelled incorrectly by some sections of the society. It is incorrect to conceptualise them as a homogenous group.

At times there has been a lack of socio-economic resources, cultural-religious misrecognition, and reduced political opportunity, which is contrary to social justice norms in a modern liberal democracy. In the modern era, young Australian Muslims can participate in the nation’s life, contribute to social cohesion and be valued in Australian society. In the past, it was more difficult for young Muslims to be accepted and recognised in spheres of different public domains. Young Muslims can participate in socio-cultural and political engagement, including retreating into protected community spaces that are less or not at all influenced by the hegemonic discourses of the public domain.

¹⁰¹ Kabir, “A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Mario Peucker, Joshua M. Roose and Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Muslim Active Citizenship in Australia: Socioeconomic Challenges and the Emergence of a Muslim Elite,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2014); Johns and Saeed, “Muslims in Australia”; Kabir, “A Study of Australian Muslim Youth Identity”; Mario Peucker, “‘We are not going to sit on the Periphery’: How Australian Muslims enact their Citizenship,” *The Conversation*, October 16, 2015, accessed November 5, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/we-are-not-going-to-sit-on-the-periphery-how-australian-muslims-enact-their-citizenship-47851>.

¹⁰⁴ Aly, “Australian Muslim Responses,” 27.

¹⁰⁵ Anita Harris and Shakira Hussein, “Conscripts or Volunteers? Young Muslims as Everyday Explainers,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 19 (2020): 3974.

CONCLUSION

Many scholars have written articles and voiced their opinions about the study and analysis of Muslim identity and the problems experienced by Muslim youth in forming their identity. Most research suggests there are many layers to Muslim identity and this is not surprising given the complexities, variations and interpretations of Islam across many countries and cultures. In Western countries, there are often misunderstandings about Islam and ignorance about Muslim identity. The media is quick to label and misjudge Muslims and portray young Muslims as susceptible to radical Islamic beliefs when in reality the majority of Muslims deplore violence and do not support extremist ideologies. All Muslims contribute to and are part of our Australian society with representation across all sections of the economy and in social and business organisations. While young Muslims may have some problems reconciling their Islamic beliefs with Australian cultural expectations, they still manage to be Muslim and Australian. This adaptive process is successful as young Muslims use their multilayered identity to contribute to the broader Australian society and be accepted as valued, responsible citizens.

In the future, the Australian government and government departments can continue to support all ethnic and religious groups and ensure racism and ignorance do not make life more difficult for our multicultural and multi-faith society. There has been progress in many areas and Muslim youth have contributed and have been part of all social strata of the broader Australian society. Positive media reporting and an inclusive education system, which caters for the needs of young Muslims, will enable them to feel they are part of our modern democratic society. Consultation with young Muslims will help them feel accepted and this will assist with their self-image and help build their identity.

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