WHY ARE YOU “ACTIVE”? -
VOICES OF YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN POST-9/11

by

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Abstract

Contributing to the literature on the Muslim experience post-9/11, the purpose of this study was to engage with a group that is often talked about, but not with: Muslim youth. Using an integrative anti-racist and anti-colonial approach with an emphasis on a spiritual way of knowing, this study gives voice to young Muslim activists in Toronto who have made the choice to “do something”. The study aims to understand what motivates these young activists, particularly in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia, with the goal being to challenge stereotypical perceptions of Muslims, while contributing to the body of knowledge that aims to disrupt dominant notions of what “Canadian” identity is. The following analysis helps answer this question, which includes the role of spirituality, the attachment to Canadian identity and the desire to educate. Key challenges and what these youth prescribe for Canada’s future are also discussed.
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Alhamdulillah. Above all, I thank God.

*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Raheem. I begin in the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent...*  

*Haven’t We Expanded your chest for you,  
and removed your burden from you,  
which weighed heavily on your back,  
and raised your repute for you?  
So with distress there is relief.  
Indeed, relief comes with distress.  
So when you are done, still be prepared:  
and direct your request to your Lord.*  

*Holy Qur’an, 94*
This Surah (verse) from the Holy Qur’an, entitled “The Expansion,” or also translated as “Solace, Consolation, Relief” in English, refers to a conversation Allah (God) had with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he was experiencing a time of distress. My understanding of this Surah is that Allah reminds us that despite the challenges and difficulties in life, we must appreciate the blessings (Haven’t We expanded your chest for you, and removed your burden from you?), and know that with distress there is relief.

As academics, as social justice activists, this beautiful and simple Surah can remind us that there will be challenges, there will be obstacles, and there will be times when we feel we are up against something greater, something that will not change. In these times Allah asks us to have faith, resist the difficulty, and keep trying; for there will be relief after the pain.

My gratitude, my prayer

I thank Allah for allowing the participants of this research study, these young Muslim activists, to cross my path. May Allah bless them for the work that they do. May Allah help them as this work is often painful. May Allah make this journey easy for them and reward them for their efforts to create positive change in these challenging times. Ameen.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. iii
"first writing since" by Suheir Hammad .................................................................................. viii

Chapter ONE: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 1
  Background: Post-9/11 Islamophobia in Canada ................................................................. 1
  Goals of the Research: Giving Voice to Young Muslims ...................................................... 5
  Reconfiguration of Identity for Muslim and Non-Muslim Canadians Post-9/11 ............... 6
  Definition of Activism ......................................................................................................... 9
  Overview of Thesis ............................................................................................................. 10

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................. 12
  Muslim Activism .................................................................................................................. 13
  Female Muslim Activism ..................................................................................................... 18
  Muslim Youth – Identities, Experience and Activism .......................................................... 21
  Articulating Muslimness within the Confines of a Nation-State ......................................... 28

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .................................................................. 34
  Integrative Anti-Racism Theory and Research Using Interventive In-depth Interviewing .................................................................................................................. 34
  Spirituality as Part of the Anti-Colonial Discourse .............................................................. 37
  A Spiritualized Anti-racist, Anti-oppressive Framework ..................................................... 40
  Understanding the Participants ........................................................................................... 43

Chapter FOUR: METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................... 45
  Description of Subjects ....................................................................................................... 47
  Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria ........................................................................................ 47
  Recruitment of Participants ............................................................................................... 48
  Researcher Ethics ............................................................................................................... 49
Additional Considerations on the Role of the Researcher ........................................ 50
Interview Setting ........................................................................................................ 51
Data Collection ........................................................................................................... 52
Method of Analysis ..................................................................................................... 53
Verification .................................................................................................................. 53
Limitations ................................................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER FIVE: INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND ANALYSIS .......... 59

Aiesha’s Story ............................................................................................................. 59
Sabeen’s Story .............................................................................................................. 63
Sara’s Story ................................................................................................................ 66
Nur’s Story .................................................................................................................. 68
Laila’s Story ................................................................................................................. 69
Melissa’s Story ............................................................................................................ 71
Yasmin’s Story ............................................................................................................ 73

Analysis of Findings .................................................................................................. 76

Spirituality: The Cornerstone of Muslim Youth Activism ........................................ 77
Attachment to Canadian Identity and Canadian Community at Large ..................... 83
Dawah: The Desire to Educate and Correct Misrepresentations ................................ 87
Community and Belonging ....................................................................................... 93
On Being Female ..................................................................................................... 94

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK ........................................ 100

Role of Institutions .................................................................................................... 102
Importance of Education ......................................................................................... 103
Our Responsibility ................................................................................................... 104
Areas for Future Study and Concluding Thoughts ............................................. 105
BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................... 108

APPENDICES .......................................................................................... 118

Appendix A - Muslim Youth Interview Guide ........................................ 118
Appendix B - Introductory Emails/Phone Script ...................................... 119
Appendix C - Letter of Consent ............................................................... 121
"first writing since" by Suheir Hammad

1. there have been no words. i have not written one word. no poetry in the ashes south of canal street. no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna. not one word.

today is a week, and seven is of heavens, gods, science. evident out my kitchen window is an abstract reality. sky where once was steel. smoke where once was flesh.

fire in the city air and i feared for my sister's life in a way never before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us.

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed, the plane's engine died. then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now. please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone who looks like my brothers.

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill. i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen. not really. even as a woman, as a muslim, as a broken human being. never this broken.

more than ever, i believe there is no difference. the most privileged nation, most americans do not know the difference between indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus. more than ever, there is no difference.

2. thank you korea for kimchi and bibim bob, and corn tea and the genteel smiles of the wait staff at wonjo the smiles never revealing the heat of the food or how tired they must be working long midtown shifts. thank you korea, for the belly craving that brought me into the city late the night before and diverted my daily train ride into the world trade center.

there are plenty of thank yous in ny right now. thank you for my lazy procrastinating late ass. thank you to the germs that had me call in sick. thank you, my attitude, you had me fired the week before. thank you for the train that never came, the rude nyr who stole my cab going downtown. thank you for the sense my mama gave me to run. thank you for my legs, my eyes, my life.

3. the dead are called lost and their families hold up shaky printouts in front of us through screens smoked up. we are looking for iris, mother of three. please call with any information. we are searching for priti, last seen on the 103rd floor. she was talking to her husband on the phone and the line went. please help us find george, also known as adel. his family is waiting for him with his favorite meal. i am looking for my son, who was delivering coffee. i am looking for my sister girl, she started her job on monday.

i am looking for peace. i am looking for mercy. i am looking for evidence of compassion. any evidence of life. i am looking for life.

4. ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca, "i will feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and my friends feel the same way."

on my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt. i offered comfort, extended a hand she did not see before she said, "we're gonna burn them so bad, i swear, so bad." my hand went to my head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead iraqi children, the dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie with fake sport wrestling for america's attention.

yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to happen, lets not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful. hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam, and it could have been me in those buildings, and we're not bad people, do not support america's bullying. can i just have a half second to feel bad?

if i can find through this exhaust people who were left behind to mourn and to resist mass murder, i might be alright.

thank you to the woman who saw me braking my cool and blinking back tears. she opened her arms before she asked "do you want a hug?" a big white woman, and her embrace was the kind only people with the warmth of flesh can offer. i wasn't about to say no to any comfort. "my brother's in the navy," i said. "and we're arabs". "wow, you got double trouble," word.

5. one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers. one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in. one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed. one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people. or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page.
we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma. america did not give out his family's addresses or where he went to church. or blame the bible or pat robertson.

and when the networks air footage of palestinians dancing in the street, there is no apology that hungry children are bribed with sweets that turn their teeth brown. that correspondents edit images. that archives are there to facilitate lazy and inaccurate journalism.

and when we talk about holy books and hooded men and death, why do we never mention the kkk?

if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip.

6. today it is ten days. last night bush waged war on a man once openly funded by the cia. i do not know who is responsible. read too many books, know too many people to believe what i am told. i don't give a fuck about bin laden. his vision of the world does not include me or those i love. and petitions have been going around for years trying to get the u.s. sponsored taliban out of power. shit is complicated, and i don't know what to think.

but i know for sure who will pay.

in the world, it will be women, mostly colored and poor. women will have to bury children, and support themselves through grief. "either you are with us, or with the terrorists" - meaning keep your people under control and your resistance censored. meaning we got the loot and the nukes.

in america, it will be those amongst us who refuse blanket attacks on the shivering. those of us who work toward social justice, in support of civil liberties, in opposition to hateful foreign policies.

i have never felt less american and more new yorker, particularly brooklyn, than these past days. the stars and stripes on all these cars and apartment windows represent the dead as citizens first, not family members, not lovers.

i feel like my skin is real thin, and that my eyes are only going to get darker. the future holds little light.

my baby brother is a man now, and on alert, and praying five times a day that the orders he will take in a few days time are righteous and will not weigh his soul down from the afterlife he deserves.

both my brothers - my heart stops when i try to pray - not a beat to disturb my fear. one a rock god, the other a sergeant, and both palestinian, practicing muslim, gentle men. both born in brooklyn and their faces are of the archetypal arab man, all eyelashes and nose and beautiful color and stubborn hair.

what will their lives be like now?

over there is over here.

7. all day, across the river, the smell of burning rubber and limbs floats through. the sirens have stopped now. the advertisers are back on the air. the rescue workers are traumatized. the skyline is brought back to human size. no longer taunting the gods with its height.

i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart. i have never owned pain that needs to spread like that. and i cry daily that my brothers return to our mother safe and whole.

there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. there are symbols and ideologies. mad conspiracy here, and information we will never know. there is death here, and there are promises of more.

there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting, but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.

affirm life. we got to carry each other now. you are either with life, or against it. affirm life
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"These are kids at a transition, between Islamic society and Western society. A lot of people will get militarized if they're unsure of their own identity…They're just young and stupid. If you're 17, bored, restless, you want to meet girls - hey, be a radical." – John Thompson, President of the Mackenzie Institute

“All young people deal with identity issues; it doesn’t matter if you are Muslim or not. The internal struggle is hard enough, and now there are a lot of external struggles related to being a young Muslim in this world due to so many misconceptions. You might think this would prevent me from putting myself out there and trying to educate others. It hasn’t.” – Sabeen, a young Muslim Activist in Toronto.

Background: Post-9/11 Islamophobia in Canada

In June 2006, 18 young Muslim men were arrested on allegations of plotting to commit an act of terror in Canada. They were arrested under Bill C 36, the Anti-Terrorism Act, which allows detention without rights to trial and due legal processes. The controversy surrounding this case was amplified by media reports emphasizing the religion and culture of the young men, although they were Canadian citizens, and protests from community members calling for the right to fair trials for the young men. As of the writing of this thesis, 7 of the men were released without being charged, and 11 were convicted. The men were imprisoned for a minimum of 2 years before their case went to trial, with the last and final conviction, taking place in March 2011 (Wilkes & Teotonio, 2011).

There is no doubt that the arrests of the ‘Toronto 18’ have had an impact on young Muslim Canadians. My personal reaction, after my own initial feelings of anger, fear, confusion and concern, was to think about how my sister and her friends who went to school with one of the accused, were feeling. How does it make you feel to know that one of your peers was woken up in the middle of the night and dragged off to a prison cell? It
seemed inevitable that these arrests would be a turning point for the Muslim community in more than one way. According to the Canadian Islamic Congress (2003) anti-Muslim hate crimes increased from 11 during the year prior to 9/11 to 173 during the year following 9/11 - an increase of more than 1600%. How do young Muslims respond to this? Apathy, embarrassment, anger? Desire to educate, desire to make positive change, desire to stand up and “do something”? As a young Muslim woman born and raised in Toronto by Pakistani immigrants, I certainly felt this desire to educate and became involved in a number of grassroots organizations focused on re-educating the general public in the face excessive media misrepresentations and biased judgement of Muslims, specifically young Muslims in Canada.

A generation of Muslims are growing up in a time when increased geopolitical tensions shake up Canadian notions of security, integration, multiculturalism, and citizenship. Muslim youth find themselves at the center of public debates as newsmakers and politicians attempt to address complex issues such as terrorism in simplistic, easy to grasp ways, often positioning Muslim youth as a troublesome population, and a threat to both security, and culture (Bayat & Herrera, 2010). Commenting on the bearing Islamophobia has had on young Muslims, Bayat and Herrera discuss:

Whether as radical or moderate, principled or pragmatic, the current cohort of young Muslims constitutes the globalized generation of the post-9/11 era that has felt, experienced, and been overwhelmed by the overbearing politics and discourse in the West that prejudice Islam and Muslims. Very simply put, the

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1 The use of “I” in this discussion is a deliberate acknowledgement of my personal location within this research. I recognize and advocate for first-person knowledge and experience being part of knowledge production, and that all research is influenced by the researcher.
recent Islamophobia in the West has rendered even ‘secular’ youth in Muslim societies to identify with Islam (Bayat & Herrera, 2010, p. 21)

Through my own activism, I have met a number of young Muslims who have made the decision to actively protest against different manifestations of Islamophobia, which includes anti-Muslim hate crimes, racial profiling and extraordinary renditions. They do this despite awkward stares on streetcars, rejection letters, and uncomfortable water cooler conversations. And yet a reaction to Islamophobia is not the only reason why youth choose to take a stand. Muslim youth, similar to non-Muslim youth, are interested in playing an active role in defining their own lives. This means also shaping, creating and disseminating messages about the issues and structures that affect their lives, as well as about their self-defined identities to society around them (Bayat & Herrera, 2010).

These youth are not oblivious, they are not in denial, and they are not naive. Each morning they make a choice to be a part of something in the hopes that positive change will come of their efforts. An obvious question arises: Why?

This question points to the overarching purpose of this research, which was to gain an understanding of Muslim youth activists’ experiences in post-9/11 Canada. In

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2 Extraordinary rendition refers to the practice of taking suspected “terrorists” from one country to another for as part of a supposed legal process of interrogation and subsequent detention. Practices of extraordinary rendition allow host countries like Canada and the US to become void of obligation to intervene in cases of torture, which take place in the country of detention (Parry, 2005). This practice avoids normal extradition procedures and legal processes. Rendered suspects are sent to countries that have histories of using torture and other human rights violations. These include US allies such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, all of which have histories of using torture and other methods of interrogation that are not legal in the US. (Chandrasekaran & Finn, 2002). Since 9/11 a number of Canadian and US citizens have been victims of rendition (Thobani, 2007).
asking the main research question, “What motivates young Muslim activists?”, the
objective was to gain insight into these young individuals and understand how and why
they are able to do the work they do, given the various pressures, obstacles and
disincentives provided in a post-9/11 environment.

“Youths”, while constituting a biological age category, is also a socially
constructed category that carries specific time and culture-bound socio-psychological
characteristics (Bayat & Herrera, 2010). They are often involved in everyday practices of
cultural politics, establishing their own social and cultural spaces, rebelling against
traditional institutions, forming subcultures, and influencing their own future
opportunities. These actions are played out both individually, but also in collective form
(Bayat & Herrera, 2010).

Young Muslims were chosen as the subject of this study because they are a group
within the community who are often spoken about but rarely spoken with. They are a
group that will be the next generation of decision makers, meaning that what they are
doing and thinking today is important for the rest of the Muslim and non-Muslim
community to appreciate and understand. Although not the initial intention, this study
focused specifically on young Muslim women. Acknowledging that the experience of
both young Muslim men and young Muslim women are integral to understanding why
Muslim youth participate in social-justice activism, I felt a study which gave voice to the
unique experience of young women deserved its own discussion. Further descriptions of
both the general Muslim youth population in Canada and the participants of this study in
particular are elaborated on in subsequent chapters. As will be discussed in the literature
review, the scholarship on Muslim youth post-9/11 is new, and although we are seeing more contributions to this field, we are just scratching the surface of this multi-faceted discussion.

**Goals of the Research: Giving Voice to Young Muslims**

“We know, of course, there is really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” (Arundhati Roy, 2004, p. 101)

In conducting this research, one primary goal was to understand and give voice to young Muslims in Toronto. This type of research can be considered a part of integrative anti-racist work, which aims to understand how gender, sexuality and class intersect with race to create systems of oppression (Dei, 1996). Through a focused analysis on members of a minoritized group – in this case, Muslim Canadians – and by critically engaging with them as a researcher with shared experiences, this research project was intended to “explore ways and means of understanding the philosophy behind the social ideas and practices in which people are involved” (Dei and Johal, 2005, p. 2).

It is my sincere hope that these expressions of lived experiences within a context of Islamophobia that has become prevalent post-9/11 contribute to the ongoing dialogue and discussion about Muslim youth in Canada and challenge stereotypical perceptions of Muslim communities, while contributing to the body of knowledge that aims to disrupt dominant notions of what “Canadian” identity is. In the section that follows, I begin the discussion of “Canadian” identity that is a key theme throughout this project, highlighting the change and/or entrenching of certain anti-Muslim notions within the definition.
Reconfiguration of Identity for Muslim and Non-Muslim Canadians Post-9/11

The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent political and social decision making that took place has had a profound impact on how Muslims are seen and understood, not just by non-Muslims but by Muslims themselves. It is important to note here that the term “Muslim” is a label placed on a group of people who are either born into or have embraced religious affiliation with Islam. For the purposes of any study that discusses the impact of Islamophobia, “Muslim” is commonly understood as a label used to categorize a group of people regardless of their personal religiosity or spirituality.

Identity construction, according to Stuart Hall (1996), happens as a result of the relationship one has with the “Other”, and the differences between them that become not only highlighted, but seen as significant. According to theories of identity construction that look at how “othering” creates the image of the subaltern, such as those articulated by Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said, the opposite is true as well – that is, the subaltern finds him/herself having to create and re-create their identity vis-à-vis notions of identity claimed by the dominant groups.

In writing about the Muslim experience in Europe, Asad (2000) argues that to fully understand the problems facing Muslims in Europe, one must first understand how Europeans understand “Europe”, and asserts “Muslim immigrants cannot be satisfactorily represented in it…they are included and excluded at one and the same time” (11) European identity, Asad explains, is based on narratives of a common civilization and history which excludes Islam and the role of Muslims in its development, and rather sees Islamic civilization as not only distinct but one that “signifies the corrupting moral
environment which Europe must continuously struggle to overcome from within” (Asad, 2000, p. 17). It is this “politics of civilizational identity”, which creates the imagined boundaries and borders in Europe, enabling a separating out of the “Other” from its definition: “These borders involve more than a geography. They reflect a history whose purpose is to separate Europe both from alien times (‘communism, ‘Islam’) as well as from alien places (‘Islam’, ‘Russia’)” (Asad, 2000, p. 18).

Acknowledging the historical differences in the development of Europe and North America, we can see similarities in how identity politics have been and are being played out in post-9/11 Canada. Arat-Koc (2005) discusses Canadian identity post-9/11 and its “reconfiguration” via a renewal of nationalism that took place after the terrorist incidents of September 11th, which was greatly influenced by American patriotism and Samuel Huntington’s infamous “clash of civilizations” theory. Arat-Koc (2005) explains that before September 11, 2001, Canadians had been ambivalent about their differences with Americans, and rather had taken pride in the qualities of tolerance and peacefulness that they emphasized in comparison to their Southern neighbour, meanwhile also admiring America’s patriotism and sense of national identity. This ambivalence seemed to disappear after September 11, however, as “the Canadian Right began to define unconditional identification with the U.S. state and its policies as central to the new Canadian-identity” (Arat-Koc, 2005, p. 34). The influence of right-wing columnists in policing and disciplining those – including Canadian politicians – who did not conform to their ideologies became prominent. This seemed not only the case in Canada, but in Australia, the United States, and many European countries as well. There formed a new,
reconfigured notion of the nation based on a "clash of civilizations" perspective, which “jettisoned those of Arab and Muslim background from their place in Western nations and 'Western civilization,' and made precarious the national belonging and political citizenship of many other Canadians of color.” (Arat-Koc, 2005, p. 36).

This “jettisoning” of Canadians with an Arab and or Muslim background had profound effects on their daily experiences and own notions of identity. With their Canadian identities questioned and interrogated via media misrepresentations and political decision making, Arab and Muslim Canadians were, in essence, considered outsiders and whose claims on Canadian identity were even less than they had before under the tropes of Canadian multiculturalism (Arat-Koc, S. 2005).

Reconfigurations of identity among Muslims as a result of this jettisoning took further shape as Muslim communities acted in light of Islamophobic discourse which permeated media and politics. As Moghissi, Rahnema and Goodman (2009) assert, images of Islam as backwards, fanatic and not Canadian has led to a new group identity among Muslims in Canada, whereby

We are witnessing the rapid formation of an overarching, collective identity or group affiliation that dis-articulates each of these communities from its specific origins, instead uniting them all as nominally homogenous ‘Muslim’ population. The marked national and ethnic diversity of these groups, along with their distinct political histories, cultures, and languages, suggests that it is neither nostalgia for a homeland, real or imaginary, nor the sudden discovery of Islam’s moral and ethical values that motivates these populations to join together, but rather a commonality in the sense of being deported to the culture of non belonging, of becoming a permanent target for stereotyping and bigotry (Moghissi et al, 2009, p.13).
The authors further argue that this virulent shift towards identification with Islam represents an ideological tool to resist Western hegemony, and has little if anything to do with an increased spirituality and connection to Islam, and point out the existence of a large group of secular Muslims who are misrepresented and alienated even further through assumptions made by Muslims and non-Muslims about their religious motivations for being active. Although the findings of this study confirm that diversity in thought and religiosity exists within the Muslim diaspora and that challenges exist with respect to balancing various "conservative" and "moderate" ideals within the Muslim community, my interviews with the young Muslim activists also shed light on how some Muslims do make the connection between activism and their spirituality. This is explored in Chapter Five – Introduction of Participants and Analysis.

**Definition of Activism**

As a word politically charged with multiple and negative connotations, particularly for Muslims post-9/11, the use of the word “activism” in this study was not taken lightly. Placed beside the word “Muslim”, the term often conjures images of resistance and anti-establishment protesters, radicals (Maira, 2009), extremists or Salafis\(^3\) (Cook and Lawrence, 2009). Perhaps ideas of hatred spewed by gullible youth also come to mind.

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\(^3\) A conservative religious movement whose members consider themselves reformers of contemporary Islam through their emphasis on Qur’anic exegesis versus Prophetic tradition (hadith) as a way to return to a more pure form of Islam. They are often seen as divided between non-militant reformers and those who at times choose “extreme” paths (Wiktorowicz, 2004). This is a complicated term because media representations and notions held by moderate Muslims often equate the term with extremist and/or fundamentalist. Although I acknowledge that this is not always true for individuals who identify as Salafi, my use of this term above is referring this use of the term.
In the end, I chose to use this word because it was the word that the participants chose to identify with, creating their own meaning and interpretation. As will be further explored, for the seven young Muslims interviewed for this research, the term “activist” was a label they identified with, with attributes unlike the descriptors used above. To these youth, activism simply meant peaceful participation in bringing about change in an environment where the status quo was simply not working for them. Whether their cause was local, international, or both, these youth understood that their participation was an obligation as a community member and a citizen – nationally and across borders.

It is important to note that this definition of activism is not universal, and that depending on the person or group and their own understanding of the work that they do, terms like “civic engagement” and “citizenship” are used in similar veins. In reviewing the literature, a significant amount of scholarship on Muslim youth post-9/11 focuses on how Muslim youth make sense of their identity, and a large component of that relates to how they choose to engage with the larger nation state. This is looked at vis-à-vis their civic engagement and notions of citizenship. These are politically charged terms and there is significant literature which discusses the meaning of these terms for non-dominant communities (i.e. immigrants, refugees, second generation members of diaspora communities), including Muslims in a post-9/11 context.

**Overview of Thesis**

In the next chapter, I provide a review of the literature on research that has looked at Muslim activism, Muslim women activists, Muslim youth in North America, and articulating Muslimness in the specific context of Canada as a nation-state. A critical
review is conducted on the major gaps and shortcomings of the current literature and the implications for this present study. In Chapter Three, two relevant theoretical perspectives on an integrative anti-racism theory and spirituality as part of the anti-colonialism discourse are reviewed, followed by the development of the theoretical framework that guided this research. Chapter Four describes the methodology used in conducting the study, including the research design, the criteria and procedures for selecting participants, ethical considerations, and methods of data collection and analysis. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter Five, where I will introduce the participants of this study and provide an analysis of the major themes derived from the interviews, which includes the role of spirituality, the attachment to Canadian identity and the desire to educate. Chapter Six concludes the study by sharing the participants’ thoughts for the future, the limitations of the study, and steps for further research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of the literature reviewed on Muslim experiences in Canada draws attention to the Islamophobic discourse that has grown since 9/11 and the challenges faced by Muslims to maintain a sense of identity, security and belonging in Canada. There are many academics who discuss the impact of 9/11 on Muslims through an analysis of media, such as Jiwani (2005), or through an analysis of anti-terror legislation, such as Razack (2005). Few shed light on the everyday lived experiences of Muslims in Canada or look at the unique experiences of Canadian Muslim youth.

The existing literature on the topic of Muslim Activism, or Muslim youth Activism is written from a European, Middle-Eastern or Asian perspective. Although my research aims to explore the Canadian experience in Toronto, for the purposes of this literature review, the review has been expanded to include literature on Muslims in North America and selected studies based in Europe. I have excluded sources looking exclusively at Middle-Eastern and Asian realities considering the differences between these regions and Canada in terms of immigration history, post-9/11 political decision-making, and considering unique experiences of Muslims living in a Muslim-majority context.

In order to give context to my research questions regarding what motivates young Muslim women activists, I have chosen to begin the discussion with literature on Muslim activism, followed by more specific literature on Muslim women activists. Then I examine research that has looked at Muslim youth in North America, which includes discussions on Muslim youth activism. Finally, I narrow the review of the literature to
contextualize the conversation on identity as a Muslim Canadian, helping us answer the question, “how do we articulate ‘Muslimness’ within the confines of the nation-state?”

**Muslim Activism**

As one of the central questions of the current study was to understand why Muslim Canadian youth choose to participate in activism, the literature was reviewed for theories that examined motivations and reasons for activist mobilization among Muslims. One major theory found in the literature is Social Movement Theory (SMT). SMT generally looks at the how and why mobilization occurs. *Islamic Activism*, a compilation edited by Wiktorowicz (2004), uses SMT to explain the phenomenon of Islamic activism, drawing comparisons and highlighting parallels between Islamic movements (i.e. Islamic activism) and other social movements, or what they refer to as “contentious” episodes, that can be found in the West. Unlike my study, this perspective does not place emphasis on the spiritual/religious motivations for activism.

One of the main strengths of the use of Social Movement Theory (SMT) in the context of Islamic activism is that it aims to remove the reduction of Islamic activist motivations to Islam and its teachings, and further removes the notion that mobilization is the result of random and individual behaviours (Wiktorowitz, 2004). According to Wiktorowicz (2004), the key implication of his analysis is that in using SMT, we take Islam out of the picture and avoid essentializing stereotypical assumptions about what leads to the activism under discussion.

With the use of SMT, Wiktorowicz (2004) finds that Muslims and Muslim activists develop solidarity through the belief in a “vague call that ‘Islam is the solution’
[and that it] resonates on so many levels in the Muslim world” (p.151), making sense of their social and political realities. Authors in *Islamic Activism*, go on to argue that because of the religious connection and justifications,

followers can be ‘moved by the spirit’ rather than persuaded by rational arguments. Given the highly salient nature of these beliefs and their imperviousness to falsification, they often sustain the level of commitment required for high-risk activism and violent challenges to secular authority” (Wiktorowitz, 2004, p. 153).

Muslim networks – that is, groups of Muslims who connect ideologically, educationally, culturally, politically, or socially – are explained as significant in creating this collective identity. These networks are seen as mechanisms which serve to recruit and maintain members as well as potentially “support clandestine activities”, and since there is a level of trust involved, they are more easily exploited for the purposes of visible and direct resistance to the state and its institutions (Wiktorowitz, 2004).

Other theories discussed for why Muslim networks work include the ability of informal organizations to leverage “moments of madness” and collective insurgency. Some hypotheses offered for why Muslim networks do not work include failed attempts of becoming bureaucratic or facing barriers in countries which do not allow for a variety of political views (Wiktorowitz, 2004).

Wiktorowicz’s (2004) work represents a major study in the field of Islamic activism. However, it is crucial to note the important distinction between the goals of his research and those of other academics interested in studying activism done by Muslims, including my study, beginning with the constituents of the group he is studying. Although he refers to members of diverse groups, such as Hamas, the Yemeni Reform Group, and Muslim Brotherhood as “Islamists” participating in “Islamic activism”, he intentionally
broadly defines Islamic activism as “the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes,” (2) and states that his definition is kept broad to be as inclusive as possible of all types of Islamic activism. This broad definition of Islamic activism therefore includes: explicitly political movements that aim to establish an Islamic state, terrorist groups, propagation movements, collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities, explicitly political movements that aim to establish an Islamic state, and inward-looking introspective groups that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts. The type of Muslim activism done by the participants of my study as well as those discussed by Bullock, Sirin and Fine, Zine, Maira, for instance, do not include terrorist groups and political movements related to establishing Islamic states. The activism done by the youth in these studies fall more under the umbrella of civic participation and social-justice activism aimed at bringing about change through education, which includes bringing attention to Islamophobic discourses and practices.

What the SMT analysis of Islamic activist movements fails to do is place enough emphasis on the fact that the context and location of these movements in particular histories can have unique explanations for how and why the groups are formed, and what types of activities they partake in to deliver their various messages. Context and histories allow us to understand the unique situation that Muslim activists find themselves in, which certainly is not the same as other “western social movements”, even if there are similar elements which SMT can provide insight into. By taking context and history out, we are making an assumption about Muslim activists and “Western” activists, unfairly placing them on a level playing field. Razack (1998) explains this idea,
without history and social context, each encounter between unequal groups becomes a fresh one, where the participants start from zero, as one human being to another, each innocent of the subordination of others (Razack, 1998, p. 8).

Furthermore, the language used in Wiktorowicz’s (2004) work is problematic because although it is working to dispel a certain stereotype that all religious Muslims are prone to radicalization and that Islam is inherently radical, extreme and anti-Western, the implications of the study still creates an image of a Muslim as an outsider and Muslims as a homogeneous category whose members need to be “dealt with” in certain ways.

Finally, generalizations and a lack of distinction between different types of activism also do not provide a complete picture. In the examples, his description of activism as “radical” “Islamist” “anti-US” groups, referencing the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt and Jordan), the Justice Party (Indonesia), and the Jamiat Ulama-I-Islam (Pakistan) (Wiktorowitz et al., 2004) certainly paints a picture that is quite different from those groups who are “inward-looking that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts” (2). Further, to place “terrorist groups” and groups promoting spirituality under the same umbrella creates an unwarranted association. Although Wiktorowicz acknowledges different forms of activism in the introduction, including those that do not take violent or “extreme” forms, most of the examples provided throughout the book have to do with “high-risk” violent activism.

Further, the work uses Islamic activism and Islamist activism interchangeably, without really defining either or discussing how these terms made popular by media since 9/11 are understood in different ways. In light of negative media representations of Muslims, it is important to acknowledge how their ambiguity can potentially negatively impact Muslims who identify with the term activist, such as the participants of this study.
Therefore, my study will contribute to this gap in the literature by examining a different type of activism exercised by Muslims and discuss the social and political implications as well, hoping to legitimize it as activism worthy of scholarship.

Another perspective that examines the motivations and conceptualizations of Muslim activism can be found in the work of Cooke and Lawrence (2005), who open up the definition of Muslim activism and reframe notions of Islamic civilization marred by Orientalism and Cold War area studies. Although they include Wiktorowicz’s (2005) analysis of Islamic activism vis-à-vis the Salafi movement, they also bring in different sides of the discussion, including a richer description of the history and diversity of networking within Islamic civilizations which spans continents. Defining Muslim networks as a phenomenon of connections across recognized boundaries that link Muslims – acknowledging both the faith and social identities attached to the label – the authors examine how diverse groups of Muslims contest and rearticulate the meaning of being Muslim (Cooke & Lawrence, 2005). The notion of umma – meaning the global Muslim community – and the collective identity that is defined by this notion is highlighted as a central precept for understanding how Muslim networks work and have worked over time.

Moving past “Islamist” activism, the authors in this collection discuss various forms of activity that Muslims engage in to express identities and advance social or political goals. Cooke and Lawrence (2005) highlight the use of modern technology such as the internet in sharing information across networks and breaking down national boundaries – changing the look, feel and reach of Muslim networks. From the
contemporary hip hop of Mos Def⁴ and the development of an “American hip hop umma”, to the spread of Sufism via new communications media, to networks organized by and for the advancement of women, Cooke and Lawrence (2005) discuss a new way to spatially and temporally understand Islam, Islamic identity and Islamic activism as fluid and not fixed.

**Female Muslim Activism**

The fluidity of Muslim identities discussed above is a key theme that connects much of the literature on Muslim activism. Literature suggests that how Muslim activists are seen and how they see themselves is constantly changing. This seems especially true for the literature that examines activism in the context of Muslim women. Bullock’s (2005) work is a prime example of this shifting concept of the Muslim activist, as it shares the narratives of 18 Muslim activists from across Canada and the US. The project itself is a form of activism; by giving voice to these activists, it challenges the notion of “veiled Muslim women”. The activism Bullock refers to is the volunteerism many North American Muslims are involved in, or what she refers to as “good works” done to build and contribute to communities in North America, despite the “Muslim-bashing diatribes” which serve to separate out Muslims from American or Canadian communities and identities (Bullock, 2005, ix). Her work acknowledges the multiple identities Muslim women activists embrace, including wife, mother, student, and worker.

According to Bullock (2005), one of the interesting goals of her book is to restore women as activists in the community, equal to their male counterparts. This placement

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⁴ Mos Def is an African American hip-hop artist who embraced Islam and whose music often has socio-political themes.
acknowledges histories of traditional female roles as members of the community and as purveyors of knowledge and the decline of this role over time. Bullock argues that for Muslim women in North America, activism has often taken the shape of quietly resisting secular environments to maintain Islamic identity and culture – the building of mosques and Islamic schools being a primary example – but that their activism is taking new forms over the last ten years and is encompassing “outward activism”, such as media and political advocacy, and social services (Bullock, 2005). In their feminist analysis of activism of Muslim women, Wadud, al-Faruqi and Quraishi (2000) also emphasize the role of women in bringing about social-justice. This type of activism is considered to be associated more with second generation immigrants who possess fewer fears about being seen and heard outside of their Muslim and cultural communities, although Bullock acknowledges various barriers to participation from within the Muslim community which affect women of this generation as well (Bullock, 2005).

Similarly, Haddad, Smith and Moore (2006) discuss the increase in activism done by Muslim women in America that is more actively pursued within the field of politics as related to Muslim rights and issues affecting Muslim communities. They describe Muslim women’s entry into US politics as a phenomenon which came as a result of the First Gulf war, and names a number of American Muslim women who have attempted to win seats in various political offices. The authors also bring attention to the fact that not all Muslim women participate in formal politics, and mention voting as a sign of political participation worth noting:

For virtually the first time in the history of Islam in America, women along with men are being strongly encouraged by Muslim organizations and spokespersons to exercise their right to vote at the local and national levels (128)
Another main argument found in the literature on female Muslim activists is that Muslim feminist-activists find themselves caught between two discourses of “gendered Islamophobia”. As Zine (2006) explains,

Discourses of race, gender and religion have scripted the terms of engagement in the war on terror. As a result, Muslim feminists and activists must engage with the dual oppressions of ‘gendered Islamophobia’ that has re-vitalized Orientalist tropes and representations of backward, oppressed and politically immature women in need of liberation and rescue through imperialist interventions, as well as the challenge of religious extremism and puritan discourses that authorize equally limiting narratives of Islamic womanhood and compromise their human rights and liberty. (Zine, 2006, p. 27)

Islamophobia can be understood as a fear of Islam or its adherents that is translated into individual, ideological and systematic forms of oppression. According to Zine (2006), Islamophobia operates as part of a rational system of western social, economic, political and cultural power that utilizes the construction of abject difference to maintain positional superiority. The notion of “gendered Islamophobia” pertains to specific forms of discrimination levelled at Muslim women that find its origins from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform and sustain the structural conditions of oppression. The re-emergence of overt Islamophobia with the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ often fixates on the bodies of Muslim women.

It is important to have scholarship specifically on the area of women within Islam given the unfortunate tendency for a large part of the post-9/11 discourse to paint Muslim women as helpless, oppressed, and dominated by Muslim men (Haddad et al., 2006). Muslim feminism critiques and problematizes such discourse which paints Muslim women as helpless, oppressed bodies in need of ‘rescue’ by the West (Webb, 2000).
Literature in illustrating the agency of Muslim women and particularly young Muslim women in Canada serves to challenge these stereotypes as well as provide further insight into their realities. The literature reviewed so far is a helpful starting point in articulating a more current conceptualization of female Muslim activism in the context of North America, but more needs to be said about diversity – both diversity within the label ‘Muslim woman’ and diversity in the communities they belong to. For example, in describing the barriers to participation as common to all Muslim women, we see a failure in dispelling stereotypes of Muslims as a homogenous group. My research attempts to contribute to this discussion of Muslim women activists by acknowledging diversity in labels attached to Muslim activism and through articulating the unique voices and contexts of the female activists I interview.

**Muslim Youth – Identities, Experience and Activism**

The activism carried out by adults and the activism carried out by youth can understandably take disparate forms and take on different conceptualizations, given the varying circumstances and factors unique to each life stage. Therefore, it was important to examine the literature that looked specifically at Muslim youth and their experiences of activism.

Zine’s (2000) work on Muslim youth discusses the potential of schools to be a place for activism through the resistance of Eurocentrism by Muslim students as they carve spaces for their own identities. Muslim student associations are highlighted as the mode and medium through which Muslim students can begin to develop “Muslim subcultures” in schools and challenge Eurocentrism (Zine, 2000). Moving away from classical resistance theories which view resistance played out in schools as class-based,
Zine (2000) argues that race and ethnicity are a basis for resistance as well. The resulting *subculture* in essence *resists* the marginal and subordinate positions created for Muslim students via Eurocentric policies and norms. Zine’s work describes student “formalized resistance”, which has the purpose of creating a space for a Muslim identity within the school. Zine (2000) also discusses veiling among female Muslim students as a feminist tool in “resisting and subverting dominant Euro-centric norms of femininity and the objectification of the female body as a means of protection from the male gaze.” This proposition is an important contribution to the literature on Muslim women and the hijab, which often only focus on religious textual explanations and justifications for its use. My study also seeks to examine the resistance acted out by Muslim youth in the school environment and understand the motivations unique to their context.

Bullock and Nesbitt-Larking (2011) have recently produced a policy report which is part of a larger study on Muslim civic and political engagement. The authors aim to give voice to young Muslims in Canada through semi-structured interviews with twenty young Muslims in London, Brampton, Mississauga and Oakville, Ontario. Their focus is to understand why some youth become politically engaged and why others do not and use a classification method to demonstrate findings. Framed by the phenomenon of low voter turnout among youth in general, and anti-Muslim prejudice which assumes that civic participation by Muslim youth is practically non-existent due to its incompatibility with Islam and youth inclinations towards “extremists Islamist organizations”, the authors set out to uncover a more nuanced explanation for why some Muslim youth do not participate.
The main argument in the report is that Muslim youth are not exceptional – that their general behaviours, habits, and desires are no different from other Canadian youth. Key findings demonstrate that the youth show no interest in extremist agenda or in issues related to their parents’ home country, and in fact the youth quite clearly identify with their Canadian identities. Many participant responses support the finding that the youth feel that their Canadian and Islamic values are close. They also find that despite what was being said in the mainstream media, the youth are still willing to engage with the broader society. Most Muslim youth in their study prefer to join interest groups versus political parties. Most are engaged in what they call civic activism and volunteerism – largely informal and administered mainly through events and actions such as signing petitions, or joining Facebook groups, versus affiliation to any formal group. Studies suggest that the reason youth – minority and immigrant youth in particular – are wary of participating in formal politics is racism or discrimination, lack of knowledge of the culture of politics, and feelings of alienation and exclusion (Bullock & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). Commentary by the youth interviewed who are clearly uninformed and uninterested in being politically active sheds light on potential areas for work within the community.

The authors discuss their recommendations which include the suggestion that policymakers focus on engagement with Muslim youth as opposed to efforts on anti-terrorism which serves to divide the community. This is particularly important as the consistent discussion of anti-terrorism efforts in mainstream media has an impact on youth perceptions of how they are viewed and accepted in the broader society. According to Bullock and Nesbitt-Larkin (2011), this shift in policy, in addition to a shift from problematizing religious identities of the youth to focusing on the contributions of
Muslims in Canadian society will serve to encourage goodwill and counter disengagement of Muslim youth in the broader society.

My critique of this report includes the possible experimenter and response bias that may have existed due to the fact that the interviews were conducted by a non-Muslim male. Also, the inclusion of relatively younger youth could have contributed to the finding that the youth had limited knowledge of Canadian politics. My study can contribute to this discussion on civic and political engagement of Muslim Canadian youth by focusing on the responses of those youth that have chosen to invest their time and effort in activism and try to understand their motivations for doing so.

Elementary and high school–aged youth are also studied by Maira (2009) as she looks at a group of Muslim youth in the US post-9/11. Her research, which includes both theory and data analysis with narratives of youth she interviewed, is aimed at discussing South Asian Muslim immigrants in the US and the ways in which they understand belonging in the context of national citizenship. Her research looks at Muslims in a specific New England town, which is a unique group according to Maira because they are coming of age at a time in US society where the state’s “war on terror” politically charges issues connected to their religious and national affiliations, both within and beyond US borders (Maira, 2009). She refers to activism done by Muslim youth in America as “dissenting citizenship” – because although youth are challenging the state on questions and issues of belonging and rights, they are also doing so by engaging with the state, thereby seeking inclusion. My research also seeks to examine this conceptualization of a dissenting activism that aims to engage and increase inclusion in the society.
Maira (2009) asks questions similar to those that I ask in my research. For example, she asks participants about how they make sense of the imperial state and its powers as it shapes their experiences, how they think of national belonging in relation to the United States as well as to India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh or to other countries in which their families have lived, and about how they imagine their relationships with young people from other ethnic and national groups and other histories of belonging, exclusion, and dissent (Maira, 2009). Through her analysis, Maira (2009) finds that the ability of these youth to make sense of their own relationships with the nation is influenced by factors which include their parents’ immigration stories. The political and economic era within which their parents immigrated directly impacted the opportunities – or lack thereof – that awaited them. The merits of looking at the immigration history of a group allows us deeper insight into the way in which second generations connect with and see themselves within the nation-state they grew up in.

Two topics that are missing from Maira’s (2009) analysis of Muslim youth’s perception post-9/11 include the process of identity construction or how youth see themselves, and Islam or faith or spirituality. Again, I argue that bringing in religion as a factor is essential in examining identity and motivation and even in understanding one’s place within the nation state, and posit that it can be done without reducing all facets of Muslim youth experience to Islam. My study therefore contributes to this conversation by adding a meaningful layer to this complex discussion.

Furthermore, with her focus on only South Asian Muslims, Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds, including white Muslims and those who have not grown up in Muslim homes (i.e. converts) are missing from the analysis. My study brings in some of
these voices, and I feel that further study looking at larger groups of youth with these identities are an important contribution to the area of Muslim youth in Canada post-9/11. Unlike Zine (2008), Maira fails to provide sufficient information on the location of the students, such as relationships with the school, teachers, families or communities. The student narratives do not always support Maira’s own sections on analysis of the situation post-9/11, and she discusses her own activism experience at length, implying a question of voice and authorial authority (Terrio, 2010). This is a methodological concern which is crucial to reflect on, particularly when dealing with youth that are being discussed as predominantly voiceless in the literature. This is one of the methodological shortcomings that I am trying to counter with my study by ensuring that the voices of the Muslim youth that I interview are articulated and analyzed in a manner that is true to their intention, without undue influence or bias from my own experiences.

Sirin and Fine’s (2008) study predominantly looks at identity negotiation for Muslim youth post-9/11. Their study, which includes narratives of Muslim youth, focuses on how youth grapple with the notion of hyphenated-identities made more distinct and contentious since 9/11. I question certain assumptions made in the study about American Muslim youth versus youth experiences in Europe, such as the assumption that American Muslim youth are well integrated into mainstream culture (Sirin & Fine, 2008). They quote various statistics such as the finding that only 47 percent of Muslims in the US identify as ‘Muslim’ before ‘American’, and polls that show that the majority of Muslims in the United States, especially women, have a more positive outlook on their lives compared to their counterparts in Muslim countries and are very concerned about Islamic extremism, (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Although the premise of the book is built on the
argument that Muslim American youth have been “othered” in their own country as a result of post-9/11, Islamophobia and policies such as the Patriot Act, much of the discussion is focused on how youth in the US are in a far better situation than youth in Europe. The authors also state that “Muslim American youth that we studied for this book maintain in no uncertain terms that they experience no “clash” between their American and Muslim heritage,” (2). The authors make this statement, but do not spend enough time interrogating some of the tensions between this statement from the youth and some of what was expressed in the narratives. This is a statement that could be interrogated further, and is one of the questions my research aimed to learn more about.

Sirin and Fine (2008) discuss civic engagement and political action together – using the terms interchangeably – and analyze Muslim youth involvement in this as post-9/11 “coping strategies”. Other coping strategies discussed include relying on friends and family. There is a lack of discussion on religious identity and relying on spirituality as a coping strategy which, although may not be relevant for some youth, certainly is for others. I hope to contribute to this discussion through my analysis.

A more detailed and global survey of Muslim youth can be found in Bayat and Herrera’s (2010) work. Contrary to the dominant discourse that suggests that Muslim youth are “exceptional” in relation to their global counterparts, not simply because of their objective marginalization, but especially because of their “Muslimness” – an attribute often equated with religious fundamentalism, out-dated notions about gender relations, insularity, and proclivities toward violence, Bayat and Herrera (2010) argue that “despite common elements of identification and cultural specificities, Muslim youth have as much in common with their non-Muslim global counterparts as they share among
themselves” (p. 5). Similarly, Bayoumi (2010) also argues that the current generation of Muslim youth are bound far less by the ethnic and national divisions that the older, immigrant generation may experience.

Though the Canadian context is somewhat different from that of the US, these findings inform my study by suggesting significant factors that influence how Muslim youth’s experiences are shaped and possibly lead to motivators for activism.

Articulating Muslimness within the Confines of a Nation-State

What does it mean to call oneself “Muslim”? What does it mean to call oneself “Canadian”? If we are to understand this question from a sociological perspective, we must begin with a discussion on identity, and further, on identity construction. For non-white Canadians, this question must be situated in the context of colonial histories and the relationship with the nation-state. The literature reviewed here helps frame the analysis on how Muslims are able to understand themselves within the confines of a nation-state and what this social and political landscape from which they are to draw their references looks like. This understanding can serve as a foundation from which we can further examine the motivations for their participation in the society around them.

Razack’s (1998) work begins with Fanon’s brilliant description of the colonial encounter – when the black man meets the white man’s eyes. Quoting Stuart Hall, she sets the main premise of her writing, which is that the legacy of colonialism today is the inability of people of colour to exist without the alienating presence of the white “Other”. Ideologically, Western ontologies are formulated in binaries. For example, the Canadian is law-abiding whereas the outsider is lawless; the Canadian is compassionate whereas
the outsider is deceitful; the Canadian is tolerant of cultural diversity whereas the outsider is narrow minded and intolerant; and the Canadian is supportive of gender equality whereas the outsider is patriarchal (Thobani, 2007). As Thobani explains, the Canadian subject is exalted through these narrations which play a significant role in forming state policies and practices.

Razack (1998) reflects on the notion of national identity building as irrational. For nationalism to exist the Other must exist – thus, nationalism as a universalising project can never exist. She discusses how the notion of national mythologies both create and sustain hierarchies based on race, and how spatial and legal practices and policies are implicated in this. Razack demonstrates how the denial of Muslim and other radicalized groups’ claims to space affect conceptions of nationhood and belonging.

In a similar vein, the oft quoted Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ and the myth of common ethnic and national identities is discussed in Yural-Davis’s (1993) work which looks at modes of exclusion of women’s citizenship and the role gender relations play in building up national identity – sustaining this ‘imagined community’. Yural-Davis (1993) discusses how national collectivity, although dynamic in that it is reconstructed through social and political processes of immigration and naturalization, is a project that contains elements of racism because in order for the notion of national identity to exist, there must be ‘others’ who are excluded as they do not fit the criteria for belonging.

Razack (1998) also brings in significant analysis of Canada’s colonial history with Aboriginal communities and demonstrates how this is just one example of the
Canadian context, the “imperialist as saviour of Third World people” is a key construct in national building.

Canadians define themselves as implicated in the genocide of Native peoples or the enslavement of African people, a position of innocence that is especially appealing because it enables Canadians to imagine themselves as distinct from Americans (Razack, 1998, p. 89)

Canadians also perceive themselves as the peacekeepers of the world, as a country that welcomes immigrants and has few imperialist pretensions. Although the Canadian nation-state continues to exalt itself on the global stage as a model multicultural society, the 9/11 attacks has exposed the limits of this particular aspect of the nation’s supposed inclusivity.

In the era of the global “war on terror,” the Canadian nation-state is being unabashedly reconstituted as essentially ‘western’ in nature, its national security and civilizational values (along with those of its American ally) threatened by a fanatical and medieval non-western expansion has been made to re-enter the global stage with a vengeance (Thobani, 2007, p. 27).

A number of studies have begun to demonstrate the consequences of this resurgence of anti-non-Western ideology. In a study of Muslim Canadian immigrants, Thobani (2007) finds that much of the backlash participants receive post-9/11 comes from members of their own community. Thobani explains this as the existing immigrant population being “overwhelmed”. Many immigrants, echoing the politics of the dominant majority, also begin to equate the prejudices held by people of colour towards each other with the racism of the dominant Euro-Canadian majority. As multiculturalism suppresses recognition of the relationship between racism and power, it inadvertently promotes definitions of such prejudices among immigrants to become equivalent with the racism found in the dominant majority.
Zine (2006) also brings attention to the struggle Muslim feminist women have in articulating their Muslimness within the confines of the nation state post-9/11. There is an outward political pressure for “good Muslim” feminists to locate the locus of their struggles strictly within the “religious paradigm” which neatly reduces the complexity of women’s lives to a singular religious cause for inequality or barrier to development, clearly declaring Islamic fundamentalism as the primary culprit in the “war on terror”. On the other hand, it is frowned upon for Muslim feminists to provide deeper, more holistic analyses that examine the root causes behind the rise of fundamentalism, global conflicts and terrorism in relation to the global formations of economic and political power. “The ‘bad Muslim’ feminist and indeed any feminist who occupy an anti-imperialist political stance, are vilified as anti-patriotic and on the side of the ‘evil doers’” (Zine, 2006, p. 12).

In this discussion of post-9/11 ideologies forced upon Muslims in the context of North America, Mamdani (2005) presents a concept defined as “culture talk”, which is when the group being talked about – immigrants, Muslims, refugees, ‘the Other’, ‘the west and the rest’ – are understood and explained in cultural terms, creating a homogenized group. Culture talk assumes that every culture is definable by some tangible essence, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence. Culture talk post-9/11, for example, qualifies and explains the practice of “terrorism” as “Islamic.” The phrase “Islamic terrorism” is thus used as both description and explanation of the 9/11 events. Culture talk also describes the notion of “good Muslim” versus “bad Muslim”, a distinction made on political, not cultural or religious lines, reinforced by President Bush in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. “Bad Muslims” are clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seems to assure
Americans that “good Muslims” would be anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support “us” in a war against “them” (Mamdani, 2005).

Mamdani (2005) reflects that the key message is that unless Muslims do their part in joining the war on terror, even if that means calling out other “bad” Muslims, they are presumed to be “bad”. Although the administration does not use terms like “good Muslim” and “bad Muslim”, the participants are very much aware of the categories of Muslims and the categories of Canadians that they are being forced to contend with.

Culture talk has also turned religion into a political category. The Bush Administration and allied think tanks say that “the roots of terrorism really lie in sectarian branch of Islam, the Wahhabi. The media portrays good Muslims as modern, secular, and Westernised, while bad Muslims are overly religious, doctrinal, anti-modern, and virulent.” (p.24).

However, according to Orientalist logic, it does not make sense to think of culture in political – and therefore territorial terms. Mamdani asks, “Does it make sense to write political histories of Islam that read like histories of places like the Middle East?” (p. 27) Rather, we need to think of culture in terms that are both historical and non-territorial. Otherwise, one is exploiting cultural resources for very specific national and imperial political projects (Mamdani, 2005). Mamdani argues that culture is not geopolitical and should not be made out to be such.

Ramadan (2004) provides his theoretical opinion on how Muslims and non-Muslims should understand Muslimness within the West. One of his main arguments is
for Muslims to move past the “otherness” paradigm, be confident, and move more
towards having a reciprocal relationship with the West. This means, for example, not
sending children to Islamic schools. He advises that instead, Muslims should better their
understanding of Islam, its principals, and accept the potential unique spatial and
temporal manifestations of this diverse religion. He also discusses Samuel Huntington’s
(1996) clash of civilizations thesis and argues that a clash of civilizations is not possible
between the West and the East because of the diversity in culture, tradition, and thought
among Muslims globally – in other words there is no one civilization to clash with.

The literature discusses the challenges Muslims have in being able to articulate
their various Muslim identities where racialized discourses on the notion of national
citizen attempt to regulate claims to citizenship and belonging. This research informs my
study by pointing to areas of tension and challenge that participants may experience as
they navigate through the confines of Canada as a nation-state while living out their
cultural identities as Muslims.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Analysis of the literature and findings from the conducted interviews was done by drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks, which provided the lenses through which we can problematize the various systems of oppression at play. Zine (2008) suggests that the use of multiple frameworks is useful for analyzing empirical data, allowing us to interrogate complex issues. In using multiple frameworks for her study on Canadian Islamic Schools, she states,

each of these frameworks attends to the various social, cultural, political, pedagogical, and ideological aspects of the issues under investigation. Given the range and scope of issues, the use of a single framework would only restrict the sociological critique and vision required for interpreting the data (Zine, 2008, p. 48).

To develop such a configuration of multiple frameworks to inform the present study, a review of relevant and fitting theories in the literature was conducted. The resulting theoretical framework used in this study integrated perspectives from the integrative anti-racism and anti-colonialism approach with an emphasis on its acknowledgement of a spiritual way of knowing. This model served to inform the development of the interview questions and the method in which the data was collected and analyzed.

**Integrative Anti-Racism Theory and Research Using Interventive In-depth Interviewing**

In order to study and understand the experiences of Muslims in Canada, it is imperative to acknowledge how groups are racialized. Groups such as Muslims (acknowledging that there are different races and ethnicities who claim this identity) are
considered racialized due to how power and knowledge production by dominant groups marginalize them based on stereotypical notions of differences between the two groups (Dei, 1996; Dei and Johal, 2006, Razack, 2008).

Razack (2008) discusses the racialization of groups like Muslims as a process that is based on an imposed distinction “between the deserving and the undeserving, according to descent” (Razack, 2008, p. 8) essentially between those who claim a Muslim identity and those who do not. Although a racially and culturally diverse group, dominant discourse in media and politics depict Muslims as a homogenous community whose men and women look the same; often South Asian and darker-skinned. Razack’s work clearly illustrates how Muslims have become perceived as a race post-9/11, and as such experience, racism as other racial communities do. Razack (2008) states,

Race informs everything concerning how I have come to think about Muslims in today’s world. As I have shown, Muslims are stigmatized, put under surveillance, denied full citizenship rights, and detained in camps on the basis that they are a pre-modern people located outside of reason, a people against whom a secular, modern people must protect themselves. (p. 174)

This is, in other words, Islamophobia. As mentioned earlier, Muslim women experience unique instances of Islamophobia, what Zine refers to as ‘gendered Islamophobia’. An integrated anti-racist approach is therefore fitting for such a study because it acknowledges that there are intersecting sites of oppression, including gender, class, and sexuality, that are perceived through the lens of race. The use of an anti-racist theoretical framework and research approach allows us, as researchers, to understand the meaning and impact of existing racism through focusing on the lived experiences of the “minoritized” (Dei and Johal, 2005). In using this approach, the study will shed light on how this racialization and emphasis on difference affects the individuals within the group
and on their understanding of identity; of how they negotiate their identity given awareness of this racialization; and of their engagement within society – in this case, through their activism.

Another aspect of the integrated anti-racist approach that was adopted in this study’s theoretical framework was the positioning of the researcher. According to Dei and Johal (2005), for the researcher, the goal is not to locate ourselves in the lives of the individuals our research is centered on, but to critically engage our own individual experiences as part of the search for knowledge. As a Muslim living in Toronto who has been involved in activism, my first step in critically engaging with my research was to select a research topic in which I could be a participant as well. This type of positioning is advocated by anti-racist theorists, such as Okolie (2005), who asserts that deep understanding occurs when researchers interview people with whom they share one or more identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, county of origin, class, or gender).

Okolie (2005), who is influenced by the work of Marx, Bodemann, Cuadraz and Uttal, Dei, Stanfield and Scheurich and Young, also advocates for interventive in-depth interviewing as part of anti-racist research whereby the researcher, who possesses these shared identities, conducts interviews that go beyond data collection and instead “intervenes” by getting at the subjects’ interpretation of their experience, extrapolating meaning from those interpretations, putting them in the wider socio-historical and political context, and feeding them back to the subjects as information arranged and presented in a theoretically framed manner (Okolie, 2005). Through intervening as researchers, we are, in effect, placing ourselves and our own experiences into the
production of this knowledge, participating in a back and forth dialogue where questions and answers inform each other.

This part of the theoretical framework guided the formation of research questions and the clarification of what knowledge this study sought to attain. Notions of Canadian citizenship - who belongs and who does not – became an important part of the discussion I wanted to have with my participants. Using the lens of the integrative anti-racism theory gave rise to one of the central research questions: If the dominant discourse is trying to deny Muslims’ claim to Canadian identity, how is it that these young Muslim youth are participating in bringing about positive change within Canada, and why?

**Spirituality as Part of the Anti-Colonial Discourse**

“Spirituality as an anti-colonial discourse is shaped by the lived realities of colonial subjects who question the concept of a universal standard by pointing out, or recognizing, its limited scope and perspective (Amadiume, 1987; Smith, 1999; Some, 1994). Spirituality as a discourse cannot be taught since it is a biologically built-in constituent of what it is to be human.” (Wane, 2006, 88).

In giving voice to young Muslims, I feel it is relevant and important to validate spiritual ways of knowing and understanding as part of the theoretical framework that supports my analysis. While I am cautious to acknowledge that ideas of spirituality and religious inclusion may threaten those who prefer a secular way of knowing and researching within academia and those who may not want to identify spiritually or religiously, I believe there are constructive and beneficial ways of incorporating spirituality into the academic discussion. First, I want to acknowledge that in engaging in a discussion about validating the use of spiritualities in academic discussions on anti-racism, my intention here is not to advocate a reintroduction of religion and theology into the academy. Nor do I intend to uncritically construct spirituality and religion as “good” and secularism and conventional
methodologies as “bad.” Rather, I argue that given the role that spirituality and religion play in people’s lives in their ways of knowing and being and in their motivation for the work that they do, it is inappropriate to dismiss them completely from the academic process. As hooks (2003, p. 182) states, “None of us thinks that education should enforce an inner life but rather that the inner life should not be ignored.”

Fernandes (2003) makes an important point about some of the results of the exclusion of spirituality and religion from academic spaces where activism, social justice and anti-racism/oppression issues are researched and discussed.

The displacement of questions of spirituality is more than understandable given the ways spirituality has been appropriated by states and conservative political movements. However, the results of this displacement have served to curtail the potential of women’s movements and activism. Not only has this represented lost symbolic and material ground for such movements, it has also allowed these colonizing forces to pervert and distort the deeply egalitarian visions of truth and justice which lie at the mystical core of different spiritual traditions (2003, pp.13-14).

As a person who identifies with being Muslim and has spirituality included in the motivations for the activism that I do myself, it is important to work from an academic framework that incorporates insights from my religious and spiritual beliefs, rather than treating those beliefs as if they are irrelevant. Shahjahan (2007) describes this when he says,

I wished to pursue an anti-colonial perspective on spirituality that didn’t see spirituality as an ‘add on’ to make education ‘holistic.’ Spirituality is an integral part of life. Centering it would require us to rethink concepts of ontology, epistemology and broader questions of knowledge production, resistance and agency (Shahjahan, 2007, pp. 6-7).

Shahjahan’s emphasis on centering spirituality in his academic work – that is, making it the key element in every thought, decision, and action – is something that I also hope to
embrace in this work. I am further inspired by the work of Zine (2001) who argues for “a critical faith-centered Islamic feminist epistemology [which] can utilize Qur’anic precepts of peace, social and environmental justice, unity, and accountability as the guiding principles that govern theory and practice” (Shahjahan, 2004, p. 186). These precepts – which are not unique to Islam – are also integral to the frameworks I use in my own research. Zine’s framework also points to the need to critically engage with our religious teachings and with the reality of current and historical oppressive practices within our faith communities. Again, the intention is certainly not to recreate an academic climate in which spirituality is imposed or articulated in uncritical or oppressive ways, but to create a climate that allows for critical examination of religious ideas while continuing to value knowledge that is religiously derived.

Furthermore, these critical and spiritual/faith-based epistemologies form the lens through which we choose to see and react to oppression and marginalization in society. Reaction from a spiritual perspective, as opposed to reacting from a secular perspective, manifests quite differently. For example, the spiritual reaction is informed by our spiritual identity and understanding of spirituality which includes, as mentioned earlier, the idea of compassion, humility, understanding, connection, and love. Without being grounded in these notions, a reaction to injustice – for example, social organizing, activism, programming, policy work – may not be sufficient in withstanding the complexities of the structural systems within which we must work.

Zine (2001) adds to the discourse by describing what she refers to as a critical faith-centered discursive framework. This perspective allows for and legitimizes analysis stemming from a religious location and legitimizes exegeses which suggest multiple
interpretations of the Qur’an, for example, particularly in relation to male/female relationships and notions of equality and peacefulness. She writes that “this framework articulates spirituality in connection with social-justice imperatives and focuses on the ways in which spiritual knowledge can act in service of emancipatory goals,” (Zine 2001, p.181).

A Spiritualized Anti-racist, Anti-oppressive Framework

This study seeks to integrate and expand on these theoretical frameworks and suggest a “spiritualized anti-racist, anti-oppressive framework” from which to view various sociological questions. In the definition used for this study, “spiritualized” refers to the notion of seeing from a place of connection, peacefulness, love, respect, responsibility and humility. It includes views from various faith and religious traditions which promote similar notions, and does not exclude traditions which are not socially and politically identified as formal “religions”.

To put this very simply, the use of a spiritual perspective that contains within it an anti-oppression framework allows us to deconstruct and analyze points of oppression, racism, sexism and classism, while also allowing us to see hope, change and solution. Spiritual frameworks can also provide ways of moving beyond an analysis that seeks only to identify the sites and mechanisms of oppression, helping us move beyond conflict or paralysis. Fernandes (2003), for example, suggests that in contexts where students are studying concepts of oppression and violence – topics that often cause a sense of paralysis in the face of what seem like insurmountable obstacles – a spiritual perspective can prevent the kind of “foreclosure of the imagination” that may cause students to disengage. Instead, spirituality can “open up the space for the possibility of a more
complete transformation” (Fernandes, 2003, p. 12) and allow for transformed conceptions of social relations.

Fernandes (2003) promotes a spiritualized feminism as a way of knowing; it facilitates understanding and reacting to social injustice as a response to the lack of imagination and faith, so that we can move towards a world without hierarchy, exclusion, and injustice. She argues that mainstream feminist movements and theories have marginalized and negated the connection between spirituality and social justice, in part as a result of the discourses on religious fundamentalism and the increased attention given to religious political forces (Fernandes, 2003).

The epistemology proposed here resists the power or knowledge imbalance maintained by hierarchical structures and instead acknowledges the transformative effect a connection to spirituality can have in rupturing these structures. As Fernandes states quite distinctly,

What is needed then, for transformation, is simply a radical form of liberation of the divine – within ourselves, our communities, our world. Without this spiritual liberation, enduring social transformation is not possible and movements for social justice will continue to be trapped in cycles of hope and decline, as they have been throughout history. It is precisely this kind of liberation which is needed if the tremendous transformative power of spirituality is not to be continually colonized by such structures of inequality and the social groups that mistakenly believe they benefit from them (2003, p. 116).

None of this should imply that a religious perspective is necessary for some of these transformations to occur, but it is important to acknowledge perspectives that derive from faith and spirituality as legitimate.

For the present study, these perspectives play out not only in the analysis of the data, but also in the methodology. In planning this research I had to grapple with what kinds of principles I needed to be keeping in mind as I developed the research
methodologies. This is an important issue, particularly because this research involves and potentially impacts other people. It may be easy to see myself as separate from my research, but I need to consider my own implication in the experiences of injustice which I draw attention to. The notion of intention becomes important here. Intention is a central concept in Islam as explained by Surah 2, verses 224-225:

\[
\text{In the name of God, the Benevolent, the Merciful} \\
\text{And do not make God an excuse for oaths of yours that would inhibit your being charitable, or being conscientious, or reconciling people:} \\
\text{God is all-hearing, all-knowing} \\
\text{God does not hold you responsible for thoughtlessness in your oaths, but God does hold you responsible for what your hearts have sought. Yet God is forgiving and clement.} \\
\text{Holy Qur’an, 2:224-225}
\]

The idea that our actions and intentions – that which our hearts have sought – have consequences that cannot be hidden, reminds me of the accountability and unity/oneness/connection I have with others, including my colleagues and the participants in this research. Further, the idea of the intention in our hearts having greater meaning than the action itself urges me to place great importance on carefully considering the purpose and significance of this research. Shahjahan (2006) raises an important question in regards to intention, arguing that “we need to interrogate our social locations and ask ourselves whether those whom we wish to serve are being served with the intention to serve them or the intention to serve ourselves” (p. 5).

Therefore, answering the question ‘Why am I doing this research and for whom?’ becomes the crucial first step in determining the way that I choose to proceed with my research. I also feel that a greater consideration should be given to the notion of staying true to my intentions and beliefs when conducting this research. Who are we? What do
we represent? Is this research meaningful? Will it have a positive impact on others? Do I believe in this work? These considerations help to ensure that I am not compromising my beliefs and values to research in order to write about perspectives that may seem more legitimate in the eyes of other academics.

Understanding the Participants

An example of an area where we can resist recreating oppression in our research is in how we understand our participants and audience. Fernandes (2003) raises the issue that academic knowledge produced about groups that are less privileged rarely affects them directly. This is because according to hooks (2003), we are encouraged to write “using inaccessible language and/or academic jargon,” even when, “[ironically] this often happens in those fields like sociology and psychology where the subject matter is organically linked with choices people make in everyday life” (hooks, 2003, p. xii). In other words, our loyalties are expected to be tied most closely to our educational institutions, rather than to the communities with whom we presume to work. Cognizant of how easy it is for knowledge to remain solely in “the ivory towers” of academia and how the structure of academia and the language that is rewarded within it often makes this knowledge available only to those with a high degree of education, I, too, acknowledge that this study struggles with this tension. However, it is important for me commit to producing work that challenges this idea and that can have an actual impact within our communities.

How do we ensure that the research we undertake is not only relevant but also important for these communities? Part of my response to this question is to use a spiritual way of knowing, based in humility, respect, love and compassion, so that the human
stories that I wish to tell will no longer simply be part of a critical deconstruction and analysis. Fernandes has written about the need to be aware of what she calls “[the] dailiness of ethical practice,” referring to the need to ensure that our everyday work has an ethical dimension to it, and that we are aware of our responsibilities in the process of the work that we do, and not only of the outcome (Fernandes, 2003, p. 52). She also proposes a need for researchers to recognize the political nature of their role as “witnesses” (Fernandes, 2003, p. 83). In this framework, knowledge is understood as inherently laden with power relationships; the scholar becomes an active witness in the research process; and the person whose experience is being shared is respected as a teacher. This concept underlines the heavy responsibility that we as academics carry towards those whose stories we wish to retell.

I chose to begin this paper with a prayer to honour the lives of the people whose stories are part of the research. The idea of respecting the lives of the participants through the use of a spiritualized anti-racist, anti-oppressive theoretical framework is crucial to counter exploitation as it places an emphasis on the individuals who are the subject of this academic endeavor.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

As described in Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework for Research and Analysis, this study was informed by the anti-colonial perspective, which validates a spiritual way of knowing, in conjunction with an integrative anti-racist theoretical framework that allows for the location of the researcher within the research itself. This theoretical framework is compatible with the post positivist emancipatory research approach which this study’s methodology was grounded in.

Acknowledging the limitations of value-neutral positivist research designs in producing knowledge on human experience, social science research has made a strong case for the validity and value of critical, ideological research. This research places the researched subject at the center, validating their voices and their own analysis along with the researcher’s perspectives (Lather, 1986). Lather’s work has provided a strong theoretical basis for this “democratized process of inquiry” which not only understands research as praxis, but through its characteristics of negotiation, reciprocity, and empowerment, become what she refers to as “emancipatory research”.

Grounded in educational theory by Freire (1970), the role of researcher theory by Hall (2006), and the neo-Marxism of Gramsci, Lather (1986) discusses the postpositivist notion of “research-as-praxis” as a contribution to the on-going dialogue within social science research on the merits of emancipatory research. In opposition to positivist research, postpositivists recognize the fact that scientific neutrality is always problematic because it forms a hyperobjectivity premised on the belief that scientific knowledge is free from social construction. Instead, postpositivism is characterized by approaches to
inquiry which recognize that knowledge is socially constituted, institutionally based and embedded historically. Postpositivist research illustrates, rather than provides a test for “truth”. Rather than the illusory “value-free” knowledge of the positivists, praxis-oriented inquirers use emancipatory knowledge.

Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and in doing so, directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation that are inherent in present configurations of social processes. Thus, emancipatory research aims to create societal transformation through the knowledge it produces for the participants and researcher through the research process. It gives participants and the researcher an opportunity to reflect, become transformed and produce societal change, which Paulo Freire refers to as “conscientization” (Lather, 1986). Such postpositivist research designs are interactive, textualized, and humanly compelling because they welcome joint participation in the exploration of research subjects (Lather, 1986). Lather discusses a common emancipatory approach in research where there is an engagement of the participants beyond the data collection stage. This involves giving the participants an opportunity to give feedback and revise their responses to questions asked and provide their own analysis to what was said (Lather, 1986).

Therefore, with the use of these methodological frameworks, in-depth interviewing using the common processes of emancipatory research was the most relevant way to collect the qualitative data for this study. Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data allows us to access unquantifiable facts about the participants and the topic we are engaging with, such as feelings, emotions, and fears (Berg, 2004). This
engagement allows us as researchers to explore meanings within lived experiences – including our own. Qualitative research provides us with the tools to inquire about how we make sense of these experiences and comment on the implications of these understandings. This method was most appropriate in facilitating an in-depth exploration into the motivations and processes of identity formation for Muslim youth activists post-9/11.

**Description of Subjects**

The population used for this research study self-identified as Muslim youth living in the Greater Toronto Area. The criteria for the participants were as follows:

- youth, defined as a male or female between the ages of 18 and 30;

- participating member of a community group which addresses one or more post-9/11 issues. The issues that these community groups are addressing may include Islamophobia, racism, misrepresentations of Muslims in the media, or protesting government legislation such as Bill-C 36; and

- resident of Canada for at least 10 years.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Participants had to be self-identified as Muslims. This included individuals born into a Muslim family and/or individuals who were not born into a Muslim family but have chosen to embrace Islam, commonly referred to as “converts”. This also included people who identified with “Muslim” as a cultural label, but not necessarily with the religion.
It is important to note that this study did not exclude certain sects or ethnic groups within the Muslim community. However, the requirement of at least ten years of residence in Canada was important because I sought participants who understood and experienced a multitude of Canadian experiences, and a 10-year period at minimum was deemed as a significant period of time in which such experiences could occur.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Snowball sampling was used as the primary means of recruitment, where individuals were identified through personal contacts that had connections with Muslim youth participating in community organizations. According to Berg (2004), this method is best used when studying sensitive topics or groups that are difficult to reach. Given common negative connotations of the label “activist”, I assumed a level of sensitivity and caution Muslims might have in openly identifying as such.

An introductory email which explained the purpose and nature of the study (see Appendix B - Introductory Emails/Phone Script) was distributed to my colleagues, who then sent the email to young Muslims in their network, inviting them to participate. These liaisons also gathered lists of contact details of interested youth from each community group. Interested youth were asked to contact me directly.

Interested participants were contacted via an introductory email, informing them of the purpose and nature of the study, the requirements from the participant, a copy of the Letter of Consent, and an explanation of their rights to withdraw. The youth were asked to contact me if they were still interested in being a part of the study after reading through the information. All seven interested participants agreed to proceed at that point.
One participant decided to withdraw after she received a transcript of the interview. As stated in the Letter of Consent, she was not required to explain her reasons for withdrawing.

**Researcher Ethics**

Several ethical methods were employed to protect the rights, privacy and the welfare of the participants (Berg, 2004). Informed consent – that is “the knowing consent of individuals to participate as an exercise of their choice, free from any element of fraud, deceit, duress, or similar unfair inducement or manipulation” (Berg, 2004, p. 24), was an extremely important part of this study, particularly given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and in light of negative attention young Muslims face publicly. A full explanation of the project and Letter of Consent (see Appendix C - Letter of Consent) was provided to each participant prior to the interview. The explanation and Letter of Consent detailed the purpose of the research project and obtained permission for participation, permission for use of their interview in the final thesis paper, and permission for use of their interview in potential published works based on this research. The Letter of Consent was signed before the interview began and a copy was given to the participant.

The Letter of Consent explained that pseudonyms would be used in the analysis, final thesis paper and in other potential published works. This was crucial in expressing my respect of their confidentiality.

At the beginning of each meeting, I verbally informed the participant on the purpose of the study, how the data will be used, how it will be secured and stored, and
their rights to withdraw at any time. I did not proceed with the interview unless the participant verbally agreed. This level of open communication was important to me because I wanted to ensure that the participants felt that this research was centered on them and that they were leading this research as much as I was.

The participants’ data was collected exclusively by me and was stored in a secure location (my home office), inaccessible to other people. The information was also seen by my thesis supervisors, who reviewed some of the interview data for evaluative purposes. Should a participant choose to withdraw from the project, I explained that the data would be destroyed. This information was included in the Letter of Consent.

**Additional Considerations on the Role of the Researcher**

Given that the study did not set out to exclude certain sects of Muslims, nationalities and ethnic groups, group norms and culture were taken into consideration for interviewing. For example, the fact that I am a Pakistani Sunni female who does not wear a hijab may have created a level of comfort or discomfort for certain individuals. On the surface, I may not be representative of the individual I am interviewing and I was cautious of the possibility that this may interfere with the interview process. I hoped to ease this potential discomfort by sharing information about myself (ethnic background, gender, etc.) when I first contacted the participant and at the beginning of each interview. The purpose in sharing personal information and commonalities was to facilitate a connection between myself and the participants; an important aspect of building relationships with the participants (Dei & Johal, 2005).
Acknowledging the potential inherent hierarchy that can exist in the relationship between a researcher and the subject (Fernandes, 2003) and how that may affect their voices, in my written and verbal communication with the youth, I attempted to keep decision-making and iteration of rules, as well as my own concepts and ideas minimal, if non-existent. After meeting the participants, I discovered that the factors that contributed to the possible “inherent hierarchy” differed for each participant and that although I was in a position of power as the scholar; there were other forms of power at play at the same time, such as race, age, and level of academic status. One of the participants was older than me and more advanced academically, whereas others were younger, and one was at an equal academic level but Caucasian. Throughout the interview process and the analyses, I tried to be cognizant of the presence of intersectional identities and different ways we might relate to each other.

**Interview Setting**

It was important to give value and a sense of power to each participant, seeing them as central to this study in a significant way and not merely passive subjects that were only there to answer my questions. I did my best to cater to their needs in terms of time and place of the interview setting. The time and location of each interview was selected by the participant. For five of the interviews, I travelled to their homes, three were conducted at their place of work or school, and one interview took place via Skype. Interview lengths were approximately one to two hours in length, depending on the conversation. Half way through the interview, I asked if the participant was comfortable continuing the conversation in an attempt to not make the participant feel pressured to
continue if they did not want to. Once again, I attempted to maintain the role as witness, giving as much control to the participant as possible.

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured interview techniques involve using a number of prepared questions and topics which are asked in order; however, as the interviewer, it is acceptable and expected to investigate beyond the answers provided (Berg, 2004). Using this interviewing approach, I developed a number of questions to ask the participants (see Appendix A - Interview Guide). The questions revolved around my central research question, which was what motivates young Muslim activists, were designed to generate conversation not just about the various organizations the youth were working with and why, but I was also looking to hear their thoughts and feelings regarding the greater context of their work; what they thought about various post-9/11 issues Muslims are facing and why the type of activism they are involved in is important/necessary as a response.

The semi-structured interview also allowed for and encouraged self-reflection from the participants as well as the researcher. Lather and Fay (1989) state that interviews should be conducted in an interactive and dialogic manner that includes a certain amount of disclosure by the researcher. Through this interview technique, the participants and I engaged in dialectical theory-building which allowed us to create new meanings and theory in collaboration, instead of having just the researcher impose certain frameworks onto the lives of the participants (Lather, 1989).
Method of Analysis

Each interview was audio taped and later transcribed to paper using eScribe. Participants were emailed a copy of the transcript for their own review, as the Letter of Consent indicated that they had the opportunity to revise, change, or remove any part of the conversation. As I read the transcripts major themes became apparent which I kept in mind for the analysis that followed.

These included identity, Islamophobia, impact of media representations, fears and tensions, Canadian identity, motivations, belonging, gender, generation gaps, culture, hijab, responsibility, spirituality, tensions between Muslim communities, the importance of education, the role of institutions, and hope for the future. I used NVivo7, a qualitative research software program, to code the transcripts, allowing for the generation of a more refined analysis of the major themes and sub-themes.

Verification

Verification was sought through clearly documented and articulated procedures, thereby allowing for replication (Berg, 2004). However, the notion of verification for research that is values-based has little to do with proving certain truths in the research and more to do with ensuring the data is credible. Here we accept both subjective and objective knowledge as working together to validate the social research produced. For praxis-oriented social research, this means engaging at the epistemological, theoretical and empirical levels (Lather, 1986). According to Lather, this is best done through self-reflectivity in order to distinguish between findings which actually occur and those that are “inventions of the researcher’s perspective” (Lather, 1986, 271).
Construct validity was a significant part of the process of verification that was employed. This includes the use of theory and the interrogation of the theoretical frameworks chosen (Lather, 1986). Further, a priori theory is also recognized as being changed by research findings – a process Lather refers to as systematized reflexivity.

In line with the democratizing and emancipatory research paradigm discussed by Lather, participants were provided with copies of their transcripts and those who had indicated an interest were given the first draft of the analysis to review. Not only was verification sought through the participant’s comments on whether or not the transcripts captured what they wanted to say, but participants were also able to provide comments which provided further analysis of the topic being discussed. This verification approach – the use of “reciprocity” in research design – is also discussed by Kushner and Norris who have written about “collaborative theorizing” in which participants have “the dignity of contributing to theorizing about their worlds…[and] through sharing meaning-production…[to] develop significant understandings of schooling and education” (Lather, 1986, pg. 35). Freire and Hall also discuss these same concepts under the label of participatory research. Such methods bring the participants into the center of the study – not just as subjects of study but as producers of knowledge – while removing my position as the primary analyst.

Lather (1986) also discusses Fay’s caution of critical theory’s potential to impose a particular reading of the lives of the participants, which implies a certain power that the researcher can exert over the research subject. Emancipatory theory allows for a dialectical process which can circumvent this. The back and forth discussion which took place not only during the interview stage but in the review of transcripts and the revision
of draft stages was my attempt to not only give the participants as much space to verify their thoughts and responses as possible, but was also part of my intention to challenge the researcher-researched power imbalance.

**Limitations**

Although there was no gender discrimination in recruiting participants, youth who responded and expressed interest in participating were all female. As a result of this, I added a question in the interview asking the participant to reflect on how their gender informs their work and how their work as activists impacts on their experience as a woman in Canada.

The fact that only women responded to the invitation to participate is an interesting outcome that could be discussed in future studies. Initial thoughts on this outcome are that I do not think this sample is suggestive of the lack of male participation in activism in Toronto. A possible reason for the lack of male recruitment for this particular study is the fact that I am female, which might have encouraged female participation while discouraging men from participating.

I also did not set out to collect data on sect (i.e. Shia, Sunni, Ismaili, etc.); I assumed this information would be revealed via the interview, so had not specified it as a criterion in the interview schedule. Contrary to my assumption, however, sect was not revealed by any of the participants in the interview, although I did know through previous interactions with two of the participants that they identified as Sunni. This lack of disclosure could have been due to a number of reasons, including their desire to protect certain information about their identities. It could have also been the case that they did not feel the need to point out their sect because they may have all been members of the
majority Sunni sect. On the other hand, if any of the participants were, for example, Shia, Ismaili, or Ahmadi, they could have drawn from their experiences relating to various forms of oppression experienced as members of minority sects, but this was not verifiable because that information was not collected in the study. Therefore, future studies with a larger participant base might benefit from collecting this data since the lived experiences of members of different sects are different in terms of their histories, the relationships among the sects, and interests they as a community feel are important to participate in.

Data on the socioeconomic class of the women was not collected as well. I acknowledge that the experiences of women from different classes would bear on the types and forms of activism. For example, the lived experiences of a person from an upper middle social class are unique and not representative of women from working-class, lower-income backgrounds. The various economic limitations impact the extent to which people are active and impact the experiences they have within the group. For example, a woman who has to work two jobs certainly would experience more barriers to becoming involved compared to those who have just one job. Furthermore, even if she was active, she might have less time to be extensively involved and her voice within the group might be weaker. In addition, while fears about current or future employment based on activism would potentially have a bearing on the choice to be publicly active for women of all backgrounds, women in more precarious economic situations might have less room to take risks and would have more to lose financially than someone from a more stable economic situation. Therefore, while economic status does not determine someone’s level of activism, it may result in certain privileges and limitations that are
significant. Collecting such socioeconomic information may have shed some insight into these factors.

Also, immigration and citizenship status can have a role in what activism looks like for different people. In the case of this study, in order to ensure the youth could draw on significant experiences living in Canada, I required participants’ length of residence in Canada be at minimum 10 years. I acknowledge that if all the youth I interviewed were citizens, or had permanent resident status, then they would be in a significantly different situation from youth who might be here without any legal status, have student visas, waiting for refugee claims to come through, or currently applying for status. Individuals in these situations are more likely to be living in poverty because of the difficulty in being employed, and also have much more at stake if certain authorities decide they do not like their activism. Again, this would be important data to collect for a comprehensive and representative study of youth activism in Toronto/Canada.

Finally, in discussions about Muslims, given that there are so many different ways that people claim that identity (or have it forced on them) – not only as a religious identity, but also related to ethnicity, history, culture, etc. – when we say “Muslim,” we are only using one word to refer to a wide range of people. It is important to acknowledge this type of essentializing. Razack (1998) comments on anti-essentialism as a methodology, using the example of women, which can be translated into the understanding of “Muslim” in our case:

Given the many ways in which women are implicated in one another’s lives, anti-essentialism as a methodology takes us well beyond a politics of inclusion. That is, we can no longer devise political strategies that start with something we might call women’s experience, on to which we would then graft the special strategies
that would apply to women with disabilities, women of colour, or lesbians. To do so is to instil a norm that privileges one group of women at the expense of others. A more fruitful approach is to ascertain how, at specific sites, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism interlock to structure women differently and unequally. When we pursue these shifting hierarchical relations, we can begin to recognize how we are implicated in the subordination of other women. Our strategies for change then have less to do with being inclusive than they have to do with being accountable. (Razack, 1998, pg. 159)

Because we understand Muslim as a racialized group, the broad label of “Muslim” is acceptable when talking about the impact and experiences they have as being racialized by non-Muslim dominant groups; however, it is still important to recognize the potential consequences of essentializing all Muslims and all Muslim experiences in this way.
CHAPTER FIVE: INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND ANALYSIS

Seven young Muslim Canadian activists volunteered to participate in this study in response to the recruitment methods as described in Chapter Four. Each came from a unique background, sharing their experiences as members of the Toronto community who felt it was necessary to be involved in some type of activism in light of the post-9/11 environment in Canada. The names of the participants have been changed for the purposes of this study as some of the participants wished to remain anonymous. The following sections provide a brief portrait of the participants and their stories of activism, followed by an analysis of the underlying themes found in their responses to the research question of what motivates their activism.

Aiesha’s Story

If you saw Aiesha walking down the street, you would most likely not assume she was Muslim as her outer appearance is similar to most young Canadian girls – on the day of our interview, she was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt, long hair pulled back in a ponytail, designer glasses on her nose, and an iPod in her hand. Aiesha was a 25 year-old law student in her second year of university. She is the daughter of immigrant Pakistani parents who, like many immigrants in Canada, had to take jobs outside of their educational and professional backgrounds just to make a living to support their families. According to Aiesha, her parents successfully raised four intelligent daughters and provided them with all of the opportunities and experiences desired by any young Canadian woman. Growing up in a Pakistani Muslim home, there was no confusion or question about her Pakistani heritage and what that part of her identity meant. She was a
practicing Muslim born and raised in Canada; a Pakistani-Canadian that was proud to identify with both nationalities.

When the events of 9/11 took place, Aiesha was only a high school student, but old enough to be concerned about what would ensue for her community. The backlash against Muslims and the Islamophobic rhetoric aired on every news channel into the homes and minds of Canadians did not overly surprise her. What did surprise her, however, was the extent to which the civil liberties of Canadian citizens would be compromised. Racism and stereotyping could be dealt with, “I’ve got tough skin”, she remarked, but what was incomprehensible at the time was the thought that her rights could be denied and she could be forced to do something beyond her will.

Throughout high school and university, she participated with many of the anti-war organizations at first, joining rallies and marches against the occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq. Soon Aiesha felt the best way to make change was to educate people. She, like the leader of her mosque, felt that the best way to stand up for your rights and make positive change was to become educated about the issues and understand why the events of 9/11 and post-9/11– for example, extraordinary rendition, racial profiling, anti-Muslim stories in the media–manifested the way they did. The Imam at Aiesha’s mosque believed that there was no real separation between religious practice and politics when it came to the protection of their fellow Muslims. This was reflected in the types of events he held at the mosque for which he would invite other activists, academics and politicians to discuss issues affecting Muslims, particularly since 9/11.
According to Aiesha, the Imam was very influential in developing her own activist mentality because he made the connection between Islam and her political beliefs clearer.

I thought it was a good outlet for my interests. I went to different [Islamic] centers, but this was very community based and diverse, not just about one culture or religion. They provide something to give back to the community…opportunities to get involved…We want to inform people on what is going on out there to our community; what we need to know.

Aiesha described the popular opinion among the organizers at the mosque as believing that Muslims in the community not only did not understand what was happening to their community, but why it was happening. She also felt that members of her community were upset, but did not have all the facts to justify their emotions. Acknowledging that lack of education was the key problem for both non-Muslims and Muslims, she wanted to be a part of a movement to get the facts out there, so her fellow Muslims could be properly informed first, and then act. When asked why she participates in this activism, she responded:

We’re not radicals. Muslims are peaceful, I know a lot of people don’t believe that, but it’s true. A lot of Muslims don’t even really understand that concept, maybe because it’s said so often, and not reflected on as much. We need to have sabur\(^5\), patience, get all our facts straight, and come up with proper ways to handle the issues. There is no point in going out there and protesting if you don’t know why things are the way they are today. We’re trying to inform people so that they can speak up for themselves and so that others will actually listen. Most people, even in our own community, are getting their facts from the mainstream media and what we’re doing is asking a number of scholars for answers and providing a grounded perspective.

Aiesha mentioned that her father initially had reservations about her public activism and expressed concern about the impact it might have on her career opportunities. “I

\(^5\) *Sabur*, which means patience in Arabic, is one of the 99 names or qualities of Allah many of which Muslims are to practice in their daily lives.
explained to him I wasn’t bashing non-Muslims, Israelis, or anyone. I was just giving a perspective…and I’m not afraid to speak up.” Aiesha also commented on the unfortunate reality which forces her to be careful about her activism, but why it was also part of what continues to motivate her,

There are so many misconceptions about Islam, and people have stuck with that. They are associating the Taliban with Islam?! That’s a problem and we need to deal with it. As a Muslim, I know there is no affiliation, but a non-Muslim doesn’t know that there is no affiliation. They are hearing this from the media. So it’s more important to get the non-Muslim community involved because we need to break those barriers….We need people to help inform because they [non-Muslims] have been misinformed.

Three years ago, the mosque-based group Aiesha was involved with started a local television show. Aiesha stated that the purpose of the show was to give Muslims in the community a voice as they allow anyone in the community to host a segment, and to provide viewers with a perspective on local and global issues affecting Muslims which would be different from what they would hear in the mainstream media.

The television show discussed topics of relevance for the Muslim Canadian community – for example, poverty in Canada, union workers’ issues, and the Palestine-Israeli conflict. Aiesha recalled the importance of the program particularly during the time of the Gaza bombings which took place between December 2008 and February 2009.

For the first three weeks of the war there was only one side of the story being reported – no one talked about what was happening on the Gaza side, just the Israeli side. We wanted to do our part to make sure our community had the facts. Aiesha’s activism was further influenced by the types of people she met at the mosque, such as the peace and anti-war activists from all faith communities and backgrounds that showed solidarity with the Muslim community. This exposure to the number of non-
Muslims who were also active against Islamophobia and against the wars affecting Muslims abroad was important to Aiesha and played a significant role in preventing her disconnection from the broader Canadian community despite the number of instances of Islamophobia experienced by Muslims across Canada. This support was crucial in legitimizing the fight against Islamophobia according to Aiesha. “What people don’t get is that there are a lot of (non-Muslim) Canadians who really do understand what we’re going through. They are being active with us, standing up for our rights, trying to educate those who don’t know.”

Despite this support from the broader community in Toronto, Aiesha reflected on why this type of activism was still relevant and why there was still a lot more work to be done, “it’s just sad that our voices are still not that loud – the dominant voice is still the one that says, ‘be afraid of Muslims, they’re all suicide bombers’”.

_Sabeen’s Story_

Sabeen was a graduate student and an immigrant to Canada from the Middle East. She considered herself an activist, and similar to Aiesha, considered the most important part of that role as educating people to bring about positive change. She was aware of the negative images associated with the word “Muslim activist”, yet still chose to identify with it.

I’m not sure if activist is the best term to describe me, but I think it’s what I am at the end of the day. I think people assume activists are always fighting someone, but I’m doing it in a positive way – I want to help others understand and I won’t stop until I do, so I guess I am an activist.

Sabeen was involved in a number of activities, which were motivated by her desire to dispel many of the myths and misconceptions about Muslims resulting from 9/11. She contributed as a writer in a newspaper published by the Muslim Students Association at
her university and played an important role in the Association’s outreach program, both of which aimed to build a dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslims students on campus. Sabeen explained the importance of these outreach activities in addressing Islamophobia on campus.

Since 9/11 Islam has been in the spotlight and not in a good way. I want to do work to enlighten people about what Islam is really about. We have educational lectures in the MSA, on meaning of jihad for example, and those kinds of issues. They are effective for those who attend. Non-Muslims do care about knowing.

In planning for this study, I met other members of the MSA who did not associate their activities with the label ‘activism’. I was curious as to why Sabeen responded to my invitation to participate and how she understood activities of the MSA.

The MSA does address politics but they do so more with a humanitarian stance. They kind of shy away from taking political stances. We don’t make alliances with political groups – like the Israeli apartheid group for example. The humanitarian stance allows us to step back and not become biased. I consider us activists, but we are doing it in non-typical ways, like in the form of education, and that is an important role, but downplayed a lot in the media. For example, we speak with the administration to ensure we have adequate prayer space for Muslim students on campus. This is activism to me – asserting and bringing attention to our rights.

In addition to her work with the MSA, Sabeen volunteered her time to support other Muslim youth as a counsellor for a 24-hour helpline. Sabeen explained the value of the hotline for Muslim youth and why she felt it important for her to participate as a response to the Islamophobia post-9/11.

This helpline is definitely related to us being in a post-9/11 world. 9/11 served to not only confuse a lot of non-Muslims but Muslims as well. So many of us were forced to reflect on who we are and what we believe in. A lot of the young people who call in have questions about their identity. Sadly there are not a lot of resources out there and as a counsellor I’m doing my best to advocate for them and to help bring about positive change on an individual level.
According to Sabeen, being active and involved in the community to bring about change wasn’t a choice, it was an obligation. She called into question the purpose of one’s existence if not to help the greater community. “What use are you really if you’re not an activist for the community? What good are you doing if you sit back and let bad things happen to people?”

Sabeen was also a teenager when the events of 9/11 took place. Although she didn’t recall experiencing Islamophobia at the time, incidences over the years kept reminding her of the cause her activism was supporting.

In overt ways, I have not experienced Islamophobia, but sometimes I get the feeling people were treating me rudely or whispering on the side, maybe a few incidences here and there and nothing major. After the London bombings (which took place in 2005) I remember a guy yelled at me “London bomber” while I was walking on the street, he just yelled it and walked away. My initial reaction was like “what a creep!” but I couldn’t respond. I was shocked; I didn’t expect it even though over the years I knew what was going on to other people in the community. I knew it could happen, I just didn’t think it would happen to me. Even though people have treated me rudely over the years, I always try to think that perhaps it’s because that person was just a rude person in general, not that he or she was reacting to me being Muslim and actually had prejudice against me because of that. This is the first time someone said something to my face. And it was shocking. It’s like, does he really believe that, and if he does, then that’s kind of sad. All the more reason for why I need to continue to do the work that I’m doing in reaching out to people – having a dialogue, helping them understand.

In discussing her thoughts on the main issues affecting Muslims since 9/11 in Canada, Sabeen expressed her feelings about one positive experience that came out of 9/11. “It triggered Muslims to start caring about correcting people’s understandings of Islam and made them care about what it means to be a Muslim.” This idea is reflected in the literature which makes note of how even those who were not “practicing” Muslims or part of the mainstream Muslim population decided to voice their opposition to anti-Muslim discourses. Sabeen shared her experience in getting to know Muslims who were
previously not overt about their religious affiliation but were now joining her in the activism,

Some people wanted to distance themselves because they don’t want to be tainted by association, but a lot of the activists came out of the wood-works, both Muslim and non-Muslims, to speak out against this Islamophobia. To me, this is inspiration.

**Sara’s Story**

Sara was directly impacted by the events of 9/11 and its aftermath; she is related to one of the Toronto 18, the group of 18 young Muslim men arrested under the *Anti Terrorism Act* in 2006. Since the arrests, Sara has tirelessly been involved in a project started by a group of concerned Canadians who feel that the Toronto 18 and any other person for that matter be presumed innocent until proven guilty. In regards to the Toronto 18, this was not the case, according to Sara.

After the Toronto 18 were arrested, it became obvious that we need to speak out for Muslims because of growing trend of Islamophobia. It’s easier to associate them with terrorism and put them [Canadians] in a position of fear. Our group is trying to defend the civil liberties of the accused and their right to a fair trial. Sara and the group she was involved was active in the project for four years. She participated in holding rallies, attending bail hearings, press conference, and writing to the media, but her largest task was informing people about the injustices taking place which were not being reported in mainstream media. “An accused was grabbed by his hair and dragged from his home naked. We sent this out as an alert to everyone we knew – the media isn’t telling this side of the story.”

When asked how supportive her family was of her activism, Sara explained:

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6 In an attempt to maintain the privacy of Sara and her family, no further information about her background or relationship with the accused will be disclosed.
They want me to study, but they are supportive and value what I do, because we have seen it firsthand and have been affected more than others. But like other parents, they still want me to pursue a regular life – study and get a good job.

At the time of the interview, Sara was not only working full time with the project and a few other anti-war groups, but she was also studying for a certification exam relating to her career and working a 9-5 job. I was in awe when I heard this, especially knowing that most young people her age find it challenging to juggle between school and a part-time job.

What was it that pushed Sara and allowed her to make her activism an important part of her everyday life?

As a young person you try to do it all. Maybe I’m naive in thinking that I can do this all, but I don’t see being active as a choice. As long as God is watching me, we’re fine, I’m fine, it’s part of our belief system to help others and stand up for injustice.

In speaking with Sara, it was evident that she was not just doing this work because it affected her family; this was bigger than her and it was bigger than the Toronto 18 or any accused person.

It’s important for young Muslims in general to know their Canadian rights and values and ensure they are being applied to everyone. We are Canadian like everyone else in this country; our country...It’s our country and we need to not be labelled as “other” in our own home...It’s in our Charter of Rights to be able to practice our religion, why are we being persecuted and assumed guilty because of it?

Sara’s activism forced her to reflect on even larger issues relating to the nature of the global Muslim community, the significance of what has occurred post-9/11 and the call to action she believed faces the entire community.

Injustice to one person puts into question our entire civilization...It’s our duty. We are like a set of bricks on a wall – we are all together in this. Only together can we be a barrier to stop the injustice, if not, together we will fall.
Sara commented on why it is easy for many Muslim youth to stay away from activism out of fear after seeing the arrests of the Toronto 18. We discussed her lack of fear, particularly given her proximity to the issue.

I’m speaking out for justice, you have to speak out. Only when you try your best is when change can happen. I’ve seen it firsthand and have been very involved in the case – from both sides, as a Canadian citizen and as a Muslim. I saw what can happen to a pious Muslim, just because he looks a certain way. I’m just taking the facts and speaking out. I’m not afraid. You come to a point when you know you are doing the right thing. It can all come back to haunt me tomorrow, but for now, I’m going to try my best to help.

**Nur’s Story**

Nur was one of the participants whose activism in response to a post-9/11 Canada was not as clear as the others. Nur was a university student who spent her free time working for an organization that provided assistant to underprivileged families in Toronto. Her specific role was to act as a liaison between the organization and Muslim communities.

Nur’s effervescent personality was reflective of her thoughts on her activism: do good, but have fun. In fact, after I met Nur, I recalled meeting her once before at a conference at the organization’s booth, trying to get passers-by to volunteer their time “for a good cause, a chance to meet amazing people and have fun.” Nur shared that her initial interest in joining the group was to be more active in the community and her desire to use her time outside of school and work to do something that could be “beneficial to the community as well as myself.”

Nur read and responded to my request for participants who identified themselves as activists working for a group whose activities responded to an issue relating to post-9/11 Canada. Why did Nur feel she fit the description?
There are a few reasons why I feel this relates to the situation of Muslims in Canada post-9/11. It's important for Muslims to get out there in the community and essentially, do good. We have had to face a lot of backlash over the last few years and to change this way of thinking we need to do good. Not just for show of course, we need to do it for Allah, for ourselves in order to make us better people, there's no sense in praying five times a day and going for hajj\(^7\) if you're not going to give back to the community in which you live, we need to be more open to different groups and cultures and become less judgmental as a society.

Nur’s response indicated a different perspective compared to those of the other participants. In her opinion, there was work to be done as a response to the aftermath of 9/11, but rather than protesting and educating those outside of the community, Nur’s motivation came from the idea that the onus also lied on Muslims to change perceptions through their own behaviour.

First of all, 30% of the beneficiaries are Muslim families, so we are helping our own community. At the same time it's important for Muslims to get out there in the community and essentially, do good. We have had to face a lot of backlash over the last few years and to change this way of thinking we need to do good.

**Laila’s Story**

Laila was also a self-proclaimed activist working for the same project that Sara was involved in. She shared some of her insights from her background, growing up in a predominantly Caucasian community in Europe, explaining that being a visible minority did not always have to mean experiencing overt racism. Although she acknowledged that systemic racism likely existed, the fact that she was unaware at that time had an impact on her willingness to “conform and blend in and even be understanding of the greater [non-Muslim, non-minoritized] community” today. Since moving to Toronto, she became

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\(^7\)Hajj – the annual pilgrimage to Mecca – is one of 5 pillars of Islam. The 5 pillars are obligatory commitments Muslims make as part of their Islam/religious practice. They are the shahada (declaration of faith), daily prayers, fasting during the Islamic month of Ramadan, giving of charity and hajj.
more aware of racism experienced by minoritized communities and developed a sensitivity to race issues even though she felt she had not been subject to overt racism.

Laila made connections beyond her Muslim identity to her activism:

I like human rights issues, my [university] background was political science and internal studies; my mother was a social worker who worked on immigration policies with the immigrant community; my brother is involved in various charitable activities. I guess you can say being “active” runs in my family.

Laila explained that a significant part of her interest came from her personal passion for law and her community. She explained,

I was always interested in legal issues and law. So when the Anti-Terrorism Act came about I was interested in how it was unfolding, how people, law enforcement, different groups within society would be impacted. And then all of a sudden you have the Toronto 18 that came about out of nowhere, that’s how I felt about it. So the timing was peculiar. Was this happening to make an example out of the Act? To show people that this Act was relevant and important to Canadian society? I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but I still felt there was a role for me to play in bringing attention to this

Laila felt a responsibility to be an activist in issues related to the post-9/11 experience for Muslims not because she was a Muslim, but because she was a “Muslim who is able to do something”. She shared very strong feelings about the obligation for young Muslims in Canada to participate in similar activism, taking certain risks to take a stand against the injustice experienced by Muslims post-9/11, particularly as it related to civil rights, which to her was a “black and white” issue:

The *Anti-Terrorism Act* waves a lot of constitutional rights that the Canadian citizen has. The concern is that the *Act* is unconstitutional. I’m concerned about these Canadian citizens who have been accused of terrorism; I’m concerned that their civil liberties are not being respected. How can we just sit back and watch this happen?

Although Laila was a full time university student and worked part time, she made time to attend trials of people arrested under the *Anti-Terrorism Act*, communicated with the
media and other activist groups, and wrote letters, blog entries and website articles to relay what she felt is crucial educational information that all Canadians, not only Muslims, should be aware of.

It’s important for those of us who are able to educate others to work to ensure that Islam is not used out of context as an argument in court to show that these young guys [the Toronto 18] had an intention to commit criminal activity because they are Muslims. That’s what is taking place in the courtroom and media right now and our group is trying to our best to promote the idea and influence change...the idea that these kids deserve to have their civil and constitutional rights are respected, that they have a right to a fair trial, that due process is ensured, that their presumption of innocence remains until proven guilty.

**Melissa’s Story**

Melissa was a graduate student who had been involved in social activism since she was 14 years old and credited her parents’ liberal, open-minded upbringing as an ideal environment within which to develop her passion for addressing injustices and making positive change in society. With Melissa’s permission, I will include in my analysis her unique experience of being a young woman from Scottish and Irish Canadian decent who embraced Islam in her early twenties. Melissa’s experience as a Muslim activist was unique because she was often not identified by others as being Muslim. Her “whiteness” often complicated her experience as a Muslim and mostly as an activist.

It does affect my perspective, coming from my background. It’s easy to think about how a non-Muslim would see something. Like watching Little Mosque on the Prairie. I know my grandmother watches, and I think about what she would get out of it, what her perception would be and I can understand it. I have always been critical of media, but I can also think about what my mom or sister would think if they read an article portraying Muslims, for example. I have an awareness of what the average non-Muslim does or does not know about Islam. This actually shapes how I write as well.

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8 Little Mosque on the Prairie is a CBC produced sitcom, which centers on a diverse Muslim community in rural Saskatchewan.
Melissa identified as an activist through her work writing for an online magazine/blog. The blog looks at media discussing Muslim women and analyzes the articles and the authors’ viewpoints using a feminist anti-racist lens. She wrote articles each week in which she discussed examples of Islamophobia in Western media and how women are represented in it. Reflecting on how representations are valid sources of information and education, an obvious question in my mind when speaking to Melissa was how her position was received by readers given that she wrote under her given, “Christian” name.

Even though no one knows what I look like since I write online, I think most people know because I use my real name. I expected people to be confused about my writing, so when I wrote my intro piece to the blog, I said ‘don’t be fooled by my name, I really am Muslim!’” Now, looking back, I probably wouldn’t have done that. Only because I know there are other ways to identify myself as a Muslim without pointing it out like that. Now in my writing I make sure that I say things like ‘we Muslims’ or ‘inshallah’...When I look at race issues and stories about white people coming to Islam, I’m more obvious about my background...I haven’t gotten the reactions I thought I would. I thought I would have people questioning my authority as a Muslim woman. Sometimes people say I’m too feminist or too western, (even though as Canadians we are western!), but I haven’t noticed it directed specifically to me just because of my whiteness.

Melissa shared her feelings about the heaviness of this type of activism and how at times the constant dealing with and awareness of racism and injustice could be frustrating for activists like herself. We discussed her thoughts on how other youth dealt with Islamophobia and negative media representations of Muslims post-9/11.

It’s hard to think pre-9/11 because I didn’t know many Muslims and wasn’t Muslim myself back then. But now there is a lot of Islamophobia from outside and people feeling frustration and people needing to prove themselves and stand up for things that shouldn’t be that big of a deal.

For Melissa, post-9/11 Canada and the issues arising from it like Islamophobia created a tension within her understanding of her own identity.
For me personally I feel like if I had embraced any other religion it would be not as big a deal, it would seem like a personal thing, I was doing on my own, I wouldn’t have gotten so politicized. There are times that, to me the fact that I don’t look Muslim, that people don’t see me as Muslim, and see me and assume I’m not Muslims, that gets to me and causes a lot of confusion. Ill end up in a class and someone will make an ignorant comment about Islam, and I guess because I didn’t start out Muslim, there is an anxiety that I actively made this choice, like for others born into it, for me I don’t that I have that to hide behind. When someone is expressing something Islamophobia, sometimes I can hide, and other times I want to talk about it. There are a lot of times I’ve thought about wearing the scarf for identity reasons to make things clear, since I don't fit into how Muslim women are talked about, It would be easy to be more visible about that. And I don't think I would feel this need if it was another religion.

For the most part, Melissa’s contributions to the blogs received great acclamation and support and it was this support that encouraged her to continue the work she does. Did she think she was making a difference?

I go back and forth on that. With this work, you are just critiquing and sometimes it ends up feeling really negative, and I wonder if it’s healthy for me to be this negative all time. There are times when I don’t feel like there is an impact but I’ve stayed with it and the supportive responses that we do get are really important to me especially considering that it is a blog. I can’t see people’s faces, and it’s easy to feel you are not doing anything, but when we do hear from other young Muslim women who feel misrepresented in the media and our blog is a space where they feel represented, that’s what keeps me in it.

For Melissa, writing for the blog was important because it brought together Islam and feminism, and reflected her understanding of the two as not mutually exclusive. She shared that one of the most important benefits she gets out of being active was the education she gained herself:

It made me aware of what Islam really says about gender and these issues, there are so many messages that are totally off when it comes to that. In a weird way, it’s taught me more about Islam…because you kind of have to learn in order to protect yourself from the misinformation.

**Yasmin’s Story**

Yasmin was a second generation Pakistani Canadian who had lived in a number of different cities in Canada – from small towns where she was one of the few minorities,
to larger cities where she blended in with the crowd. Busy with her graduate studies, Yasmin relied on the online activist community to keep her engaged in post-9/11 issues affecting Muslims in Canada. She also wrote for a popular blog which analyzed negative media representations of Muslims and Muslim women globally. She limited her activism to online activities and included her use of Facebook as a means of sharing her political viewpoints with her network of friends, family, acquaintances and colleagues. Her goal was to disseminate information about Muslims – different viewpoints and arguments – and did so by reaching people online. She explained that wherever she lived, there either was not a large Muslim community, or if there were, they were not very politically active, so for her, access to the internet was crucial as it was an easy way for her to connect to the activist community.

One of the blogs she wrote for critically looked at international media and how they portrayed Muslim women. She took an anti-oppression and anti-racism perspective to critique the portrayals. The other blog took a similar approach but looked at both male and female representations. “My goal is to call out misogynistic, racist and xenophobic portrayals of Muslims. The idea is to get people to critically think about these issues and for themselves see how they too can critically analyze the ways in which Muslims are portrayed.”

Yasmin recalled that she first became interested in activism as a response to members of the Muslim community whose opinions often made her feel like she did not fit in. She shared how meeting the editor of the blog was instrumental in her anti-racist, anti-Islamophobia activism:

I met the editor on Facebook and we had similar interests. We both felt excluded from the Muslim community and that’s how we bonded. I liked her ideas and I
thought it was a good way to analyze what we see in the media. Initially I was critical of how Muslims were portraying Muslims, because my position was that I was excluded from the community. So I was questioning how Muslims portrayed Muslims as one monolithic image – act, dress, practice the same way. But I see other images, more racist and xenophobic and so then there is a desire to defend yourself to people outside of the community.

Yasmin further explained how she started to notice how these Islamophobic images began to impact her life personally and how people around her started to demonstrate misunderstandings of her. As Zine (2006) points out, Muslims who critique other Muslims and practices within the community should understand the implications of their critiques and how they could potentially be misunderstood and actually feed further Islamophobia. Yasmin caught onto this idea quite quickly, particularly when she started to see the “good Muslim”, “bad Muslim” discourse being played out in the media, led by members of the Muslim community like Irshad Mehnji and Tarek Fatah.

The “good Muslim” versus “bad Muslim” discourse has been of particular interest to Yasmin in her activism and she expressed that she often self-identified as “average Muslim”, as opposed to those who followed the tradition in a more fundamental way and as opposed to those who are often referred to as “ progressives”. She explained,

Often I thought of myself as an ‘average’ Muslim but I’m aware that there is no one kind of Muslim, and even when I say ‘average’, I don’t mean that there is one kind. What I noticed [through my activism work] is that there were certain voices that were being referred to as Canadian Muslims, and they are voices which a lot

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9 Tarek Fatah is a self-proclaimed secular Muslim Canadian political activist, writer and journalist for media outlets such as the National Post and Macleans. He is the founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress, and advocates for a secular states and for a liberal, “progressive” form of Islam. He is also openly critical of Sharia law and veiling. Many Canadian Muslim groups and individuals have expressed that Fatah, who is often interviewed by mainstream media, does not represent the values, thoughts and opinions of the majority of Muslims in Canada. Many critics of Fatah appeases racist western discourse about Muslims and Islam and fails to understand Muslim frustration, instead referring to those who challenge racism and stereotyping as “Islamists” and adherents to “a jihadi-Islamist agenda” (http://www.muslimcanadiancongress.org/).
of Muslims don’t agree with or feel represent them. So the average Muslim is the ‘other’ – the one that doesn’t agree with the spokes people that the Canadian media has chosen to represent us, like Tarek Fatah.

Yasmin commented on how mainstream media representations of Muslims was a key reason for why she was active and reflected on what this meant for her own understanding of her identity within this environment and the lack of simplicity the term actually contained:

Myself personally, I have a hard time with this, the notion of Muslim identity. I am constantly juggling between different identities. Where I grew up, there were very few Muslims around, so expression of and exposure to Muslim identity was limited to my home. Even today, most of my friends, colleagues, teachers, are all non-Muslim. The Muslim part of me is very personal, and although I do this activism online, and have become defensive of Muslims being represented poorly in the media, the Muslim identity is very personal.

**Analysis of Findings**

Throughout the interviews with the participants, conversation largely revolved around understanding what exactly motivates these young activists to do what they do, particularly in the context of post-9/11 Canada where calling yourself a Muslim activist can conjure up images of fanatical Muslims and terrorists. What was the context behind the work of these individuals? From what vantage point were they coming from? What were their thoughts on who they were, what they stand for and the relevance of their work?

As the study attempted to answer some of these questions, a number of common themes were derived from the interviews, such the role of spirituality in Muslim youth activism, the attachment to Canadian identity and Canadian community at large, the desire to educate and correct misrepresentations through activism, and notions of community and belonging in general. The following analysis discusses these four main
themes, which in combination help to answer the question of what motivates young Muslim activists, with a focus on an expression of identity. Following this discussion of key themes, I also examine some comments on gender as it relates to this study. Finally, I highlight some of the key challenges the youth face, and what these youth prescribe for Canada’s future.

**Spirituality: The Cornerstone of Muslim Youth Activism**

I reflected on the notion of activism in Islam as the participants spoke a lot about the Islamic imperative to do good for your community and help others being one of the motivating factors for being engaged with social justice and community activism. There are a number of verses in the Qur’an that speak to the notion of being active and “doing”, as opposed to only the private, internal practice. The notion of justice and doing good deeds is immanent through the Qur’an and the hadith (account of the Prophet Muhammad’s life). For example, Sura Al-`Asr says, *I swear by the declining day, that humans are in loss, except those who have faith and do righteous deeds and counsel one another to follow the truth and counsel one another to be steadfast* (103:1-3). When asked what role, if any, spirituality played in informing their work, all of the participants indicated that they felt their spirituality – their understanding of Islam – was a significant motivating factor in why they became active and continued to be active.

Sabeen commented on the distinction she drew between being self-motivated and being inspired by God/Islam/spirituality to be active,

People have goodness towards man but that only goes so far. I’m not saying they don’t have noble intentions, but when you couple it with spiritual motivation it does not die out. I hope I never stop caring about people, and for me [if that happens] I know it comes from a spiritual place.
This reflects what Fernandes (2003) writes about the importance of spirituality in adding more authenticity and groundedness to social-justice activism. This was echoed in Sara’s response to my question about spirituality,

For me [spirituality] kept me grounded in what I was doing. Having spirituality, made me feel sure that I was being rational. This is hard to explain – but it’s the idea that, because I am grounded in spirituality – in trust and faith in God - I am able to deal with hard things, one step at a time.

Sara’s explanation suggests her spirituality was more than just motivation for the work that she was doing – it is also what allowed her to make sense of her activism, and have the ability to carry on with her work amidst a challenging environment. The comments suggest that grounding their activism in spirituality helps with endurance.

In Sirin and Fine’s (2008) study of Muslim youth in the US, they found that spirituality and religion was the most common coping strategy employed by youth in dealing with the challenges of living in a post-9/11 environment of Islamophobia and discrimination. Similar to the participants in this study, Sirin and Fine (2008) also found that not only was religion and spirituality used as a coping mechanism by the youth, it also gave context to the bigger picture, that is, the meaning and purpose of life within which we are given challenges as tests of faith.

To a large extent, after speaking with the youth I also can see that their activism, grounded in spirituality, was a form of coping. These youth felt engaged and empowered by the activities they participated in, and an important by-product of this, whether they were conscious of it or not, was that this activism helped deal with the challenges of a post-9/11 environment for Muslims. Aiesha also reflected on this:
Spirituality plays a pretty important role in my work. It’s almost like its where it came from. I’ve always had a strong sense of spirituality. It’s an inner feeling that I’ve had that makes me want to do something for the community – to give back. I don’t think it even disappears; it stays with you with everything you do. It allows you have meaning behind what you do. I’ve always wanted a way to give back to the community, and this [activism] gives me that space in which I can give back.

Yasmin echoed Aiesha’s sentiments regarding reliance on spirituality as a way to deal with the frustration encountered in her work,

Spirituality for me is based in Islam, it’s an Islamic spirituality. It affects everything I do in my life – school, work, whatever I do with the blogs. There is a certain reliance on it for one. When you come across many negative things in the media, it can get really draining, and spirituality keeps you balanced, floating, and thinking positive. You think at the end of the day you can pray or turn to God and it helps you deal with things, keep perspective, and be thankful for what you do have.

In her work with the Muslim youth helpline, Sabeen chose to rely on her faith and what it said about developing one’s character, and used this to make sense of the trial and tribulations faced by herself and the other youth she talked to. “The positive spin you can take on this is that with both internal and external struggle you get through it and come out a much stronger person. So, in that respect, I guess we’re lucky” (Sabeen).

A central teaching of Islam is that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent by God as an example of a perfected being, and that Muslims should strive to be like him in terms of his value and behaviours. Sara commented on this as a motivating factor in her activism,

I started to study the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and discovered that he really is a role model to us – socially, politically, as he was with his family. So I wanted to see what he did when injustice happened to him.

The Qur’an and the hadith recount different stories of when various Prophets endured injustice and persecution throughout their lives. Sara shared the example of when Prophet Muhammad first began to share Islam with his community and was persecuted by the
Quraish tribe. They threw stones, dirt, garbage, tried to hurt him, but he maintained his patience with them. “I was moved. I got inspired from reading about it. Because of this I was able to come up with different strategies and steps I should take in dealing with the injustices I was trying to fight.”

Leila described spirituality as motivation in a way that was slightly different from the rest – she commented on Sharia law. Sharia law\(^\text{10}\) – Islamic law governing the Islamic way of life derived from the Qurʾan and the Sunnah (examples from the life of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) has been hotly debated among and between Muslims and non-Muslims, mainly because there is no consensus regarding its interpretation. As such, there are communities of Muslims who feel that some authorities in Muslim majority countries have interpretations of Sharia which are not aligned with various human rights. Leila’s understanding of the divine guidance offered through Sharia is that it is not only compatible with social justice activism, but also suggests an obligation for Muslims to be activists. Leila explains:

> I like to read about how Sharia law speaks to certain issues, and how it might contradict civil law, as most critics argue. I personally feel that there is not much contradiction when it comes to the principals – it’s just in how people interpret it. So for me, even by Islamic law there is an obligation to help others and upload our common human rights. As a Muslim, helping one person is like helping everyone. We have an obligation to act.

The notion of obligation takes us back to the idea that social-justice activism is prescribed in Islam. Each participant discussed, to varying degrees, their belief that there is a duty upon all Muslims to do something to help others and themselves when faced with injustice. Activism and spirituality are tied together for these youth and together form

\(^{10}\) Definition of Sharia being law versus an ethos is also debated. Some interpret Sharia as divine knowledge, and the human interpretation of it, that is *fiqh*, is really what is referred to as Islamic law.
part of their daily practice. The dailiness is what not only sustains them in the work that they do, but it also serves to be a constant reminder of what they are working for, allowing for consciousness as well. Here we can draw parallels between Freire’s (1970) notion of conscientização, or critical consciousness, and this connection between spiritual understanding and action. Critical consciousness allows for an awareness of the existence of oppression – recognizing that one is “object” to the will of others rather than being a self-determining “subject” – through breaking through prevailing narratives and mythologies. This process, called conscientization, occurs as one identifies contradictions in experience by way of dialogue and participation in acts that change the world (Freire, 1970).

The conscious bringing together of spirituality and activism was articulated well by Melissa who spoke about the importance she felt in actually bringing elements of her religious practice into her activist work, beyond just having an awareness of the connection between the two. She explains,

It is important that this blog is not just a safe space but a safe Muslim space. And it is important to be able to look at the articles and not just look at what’s wrong with them but also look at the people in them and say a prayer for them, for example, in the case of Aqsa Parvez.\textsuperscript{11}...It’s hard to read some stuff, seeing how this women’s body is being used to justify hatred, and so I turned off the computer and read the Qur’an for a bit. It made a big difference in how I felt afterwards and allowed me to carry on with my work...There are other times when you’re writing and frustrated and then it’s time to pray and it does give you a sense of perspective and feeling that it’s worth it; that the whole world isn’t completely terrible, and there are reasons for our activism, and we are not totally helpless.

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\textsuperscript{11} Aqsa Parvez, may she rest in peace, was a young girl who was killed in 2009 in Mississauga, Ontario. Her father and brother have been charged in her death. Media coverage blamed the brother and father’s religion (Islam) and culture (Pakistani) for inspiring their motivations. This discourse has been debated by many who feel that to bring in religion and ethnicity in a case that is about violence against women – a culturally universal behavior - is racist and Islamophobic.
Melissa’s comments reflect the overall feeling among the participants that it was important for them to know that their activism was not futile – that there was a greater purpose and point to their actions. For many youth, their inactivity is related to their feeling helpless when faced with or made aware of various injustices (Sirin & Fine, 2008). For these young Muslim activists, their spirituality and understanding of the “bigger picture” gave them that resilience that is required to carry on with their activism. With regards to this “bigger picture”, Zine (2008) also writes that this civic engagement, key to the development of society in general, can be “revitalized…as spaces of resistance to injustice and oppression” through engagement with religion and spirituality (Zine, 2008, p. 309). This is an important view regarding the connection between spirituality and activism, resulting in more engaged citizens, which she argues benefits society as a whole.

Finally, in line with this study’s finding that young Muslims in Canada largely succeed in maintaining a balance between their Canadian culture and religion despite the challenges of post-9/11 conditions, Bullock and Nesbitt-Larking’s (2011) study on Canadian Muslim youth also concluded that although popular opinions are that young Muslims in Canada either have tendencies towards extremism, or that they are secular and disconnected from their religious/spiritual backgrounds, neither was necessarily the case for their participants. This conclusion is consistent with other studies based on Canadian and American Muslim youth such including those of Sirin and Fine (2008), Maira (2009), and Moosa-Mitha (2009).
**Attachment to Canadian Identity and Canadian Community at Large**

Second to spiritual and religious motivations for being active in society, it became clear through the interviews that an attachment to Canadian identity and Canadian values of social justice was another principal motivator for the activism of the participants. Although they discussed that the notion of social justice was inherent in their understanding of Islam, the participants also suggested that social justice was also inherent in their understanding of being Canadian. Citizenship, democracy and the rights that are afforded to all Canadians in theory were taken seriously by the participants and were very much a part of their ever-evolving identities.

We have an obligation to understand what’s going on and take a proactive step. It’s our country and we need to not be labeled as ‘other’ in our own country. It’s in our Charter of Rights to be able to practice our religion freely. (Sara)

Sirin and Fine’s (2008) study of US Muslim youth and Bullock and Nesbitt-Larking’s (2011) study of Canadian Muslim youth both showed that contrary to what was expected based on popular discourse – clear detachment from either Canadian/US community identity or from Muslim identity – what was found was that despite negative and Islamophobic media and political decision making, the youth were not willing to “give up” their Canadian/American identities (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 2).

Reflecting on the narratives of imagined community and national mythology which serve to alienate Muslims in the context of post-9/11 Canada, it is important to consider how and why the attachment to Canadian identity exists. Bullock and Nesbitt-Larking conclude that young Muslims are able to transcend anti-Muslim narratives and experiences and still have a willingness to engage (Bullock & Nesbit-Larking, 2011).
I’m fortunate to live here; generally people are nice and open. When you take the time to talk to people [non-Muslims] they are generally open and even though sometimes they have misconceptions but it’s not their fault. (Nur)

You don’t want to create an image that we [Muslims] feel “they are totally wrong” and openly bash them. It’s not helpful for society in generally, or Muslims specifically. We need to start showing that we are part of society and we care just as much as others. But there is a way to doing things. It may go against your personally beliefs, but you have to suck it up at times. (Laila)

This conclusion was shared with some of the other participants as well – the idea that they were willing to “suck it up” sometimes and do something for the sake of creating better relationships with their fellow Canadians. The participants exhibited a sincere desire to be a part of Canadian society – not be alienated from it, despite their different political beliefs.

For example, Sara often spoke to various members of the community in relation to her activism. She made it a point to cover her head even though she doesn’t normally wear a hijab. Her goal in doing this was for non-Muslims to see examples of women in hijab who are confident, informed, and speak English – “I want them to see that we are ‘normal’ Canadians”.

In response to my request for comments on the topic of being Canadian, I was somewhat surprised with the degree to which the participants valued their Canadian identity. They had an understanding of their Canadian identity – and expressed pride in it – as well as their Muslim identity. For example,

I’m equally Canadian as anyone else, so I’m not afraid of anything happening to me. Being afraid won’t get me far. (Sara)

Growing up Canadian we have come to accept our identity as Canadian. We can speak up for our rights. It’s a multicultural society. We [Muslims] are friends with everyone, why wouldn’t I be proud to be Canadian. (Laila)
I grew up thinking that we are all the same. Muslim kids are just like others kids out there, with the same needs and wants. (Nur)

It was evident that these youth felt very much a part of Canadian society, not like outsiders as I expected them to feel. At the same time, they also were aware of their “minority” status. “Although it’s forced me to realize that I’m different, I also know that I am the same as everyone else. Other than knowing that I am proud to be Muslim, I’m the same as them,” iterated Sara as she spoke to me about her response to negative media representations of Muslims.

Yasmin commented on the labelling and the meaning behind those labels,

When someone asks us what we are, Canadian doesn’t come out because it’s assumed. Since 9/11, I feel that more people call me Pakistani, or Muslim or want me to say Pakistani or Muslim when I’m asked ‘what are you/where are you from’. And truth be told, I do feel that my Muslim identity comes first in order of importance, and second my Canadian identity.

Once again, although her activism may have made her seemingly stand apart from her non-Muslim Canadian community, to Yasmin, there was no question about her being Canadian. Her activism was not meant to create that division, nor did she want it to, “I have not felt less Canadian since 9/11, how can I, I was born here...Being Canadian is important, I don’t want to let that go.”

So then, what did the participants feel about the current climate in the country?

Did they feel a part of it, being a Canadian? Laila expressed her thoughts:

We are all complicit, especially when we just stand by and let things like this [unfair persecution of Muslims] happen. I was more proud of being Canadian when I was younger than I am now. Now I can see we have a lot more complexities happening in our politics. I’m still happy and proud to be Muslim, I’m just disappointed with the government…We need to start showing that we are part of Canadian society and we care just as much as others. There is a way to doing things. We need to be careful at times.
This theme of maintaining and promoting one’s Canadian part of identity surpassingly came up in each of the interviews. It was surprising to me because I had a preconceived notion that the participants would focus their discussion on the challenges within a post-9/11 community which inspired them to become active, to speak out, and to set themselves apart from others. What I heard instead was a very firm understanding from each participant of their Canadian identity, which remained intact regardless of the dominant discourse which was “othering” the Canadian Muslim community. I was also surprised to learn that the participants each felt outreach to non-Muslims in the form of dialogue and cooperation was an important aspect of their activism.

The participants were aware of the misconceptions held by the general public about Muslims and Islam, as demonstrated by various representations in the media and through their personal interactions with colleagues, friends, neighbours, etc. Although this was not an initial motivating factor for their activism, somewhat of a by-product of it was the desire to mend relationships between Canadian Muslims and Canadian non-Muslims – the desire to say, “You and I are the same. We are both Canadian. Muslims are good.”

For Melissa, having embraced Islam in her early twenties after having grown up in a non-Muslim household, her identity also informed the work she did, as mentioned earlier. She was able to write sympathetically with the non-Muslim reader in mind because she understood how certain misconceptions about Muslims came about and also understood the fine line between being uninformed and being racist.
To those Muslims who feel that they have to choose Muslim identity over Canadian identity, or vice versa, Sabeen responded, “I want young Muslims to know that it is possible to be both a Muslim and a Canadian without having to compromise or betray either.” Sabeen further warned, “There is a lot of work required to maintain integrity in both. 9/11 made it harder. That’s just our reality.”

Speaking towards this difficulty, Sara commented on the reactions she got from within her own Muslim community at times. “Sometimes people say I’m too western, but that confuses me, because I am western!” Once again, these activists demonstrated an understanding and appreciation of both Muslim and Canadian/Western cultures, which shaped their identity.

**Dawah: The Desire to Educate and Correct Misrepresentations**

Islamophobia is very real. Racism is very real. The problem is that you have a lot of "perceptions" [as opposed to hard facts] and you only get to hear and know things via whatever outlet you have access to. The media censors - in a way - what information we get, and what we get is very biased. This means a lot of facts don't reach the public. If you don't go to the trials, or example, you don’t see firsthand what’s going on - how the evidence is resented and how the case is unfolding. You don't get the full story from what the media reports. (Laila)

We are losing our identity and this is becoming the norm. It’s becoming ok for that to happen, just because people have this misconception about Muslims. On the one hand people are proud to be Muslim, and then there are those who don’t want to have anything to do with it anymore. They just want to make it through life easily. When you think about it that way, can you really blame them? It’s hard to be Muslim today. But this is exactly why I do –I’m trying to re-educate people. (Aiesha)

It was clear that the participants did not think lightly of the challenges and possible threats to their future due to their participation in educating and correcting Islamophobic misrepresentations, yet they still made the conscious choice to pursue these goals. The youth discussed this desire to educate through creating awareness and engaging in
dialogue. This is in fact akin to the Islamic notion of *Dawah* which refers to the system of Islamic education that encourages the spread of Islamic knowledge through dialogue with non-Muslims (Zine, 2008).

It is important to note that the youth were very well aware of the notion of cultural relativism and the educating they were interested in was not about defending Islam in response to the anti-Muslim discourse. In fact we discussed at length the challenges some of them had with the apologetic approach of certain Muslims and non-Muslim public figures who made it a point to make public denunciations of terrorist activity on behalf of the so-called ‘moderate’ Muslims. This reductionist focus on Islam – even if it was to discuss why Islam is not an inherently violent religion – actually reinforced neo-Orientalism which ignores the geopolitical analysis of the issues (Maira, 2004). Asad Abu Khalil (2002) problematizes this type of education/re-education, underscoring the “theologocentrism” in this post-9/11 discourse which equates Islamic theology with the politics in the Arab and Muslim majority countries (Maira, 2004). The youth activists interviewed made it apparent the goal and/or motivation behind their work was not to respond to Islamophobia through an explanation of Islam. Rather they felt that there was a clear distinction between this and what they were interested in, which was to critique, call attention to and correct misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims. Further, the interest in maintaining a connection to the larger Canadian community was also motivated by this interest, as explained in subsequent sections of this analysis.

In response to some Muslims and non-Muslims who have been apologetic about Islam in the public, Laila states,
There is a difference between being politically correct and going out of your way to contradict your religious beliefs to please the social atmosphere. These guys do that to much. Like the Canadian Muslim Congress and Tariq Fatah; he comes across as a moderate Muslim, and I describe myself as a moderate Muslim but I think even within that category there are huge variations, and there are certain things he stands for and talks about that not only go against Islam but place the blame on Islam. This is not what we [activist group] are about at all, even when we go out into the community, it’s pretty clear we are not represented by these guys.

The strong sense of awareness of both the issues they were up against as well as of their role as activists exemplified the fearlessness of these youth. Despite this, the idea of being afraid came up a number of times throughout the interviews. They were aware that their activism could be misconstrued, in light of anti-Muslim discourse which associated Muslims and Islam with terrorists. Despite realities of the “war on terror” and the violence and injustice experienced by innocent Muslims as a result, the youth were not afraid to speak up. Aiesha explained her views on this,

Overall I don’t have a fear of speaking. My point is not to offend anyone. I want to have a discussion as a result of my activism – bring attention to issues and have a discussion. At the same time, I think you have to be smart about the time and place – I don’t want to instigate confrontation.

Laila also commented on the role mainstream media plays in making other Muslim youth shy away from activism and getting involved in groups that speak out on post-9/11 issues, such as lobbying for the right to fair trials for the Toronto 18. She went on to explain that negative media representations "scare" these youth into not being active because they feel there is too much to lose.

The media plays a big role in how we are portrayed and understood by non-Muslims, and even other Muslims. A lot of your people are trying to make a life for themselves - they are paying for expensive education, they want to build their careers, they have aspirations to work with big firms, they want to have the same lifestyle as any other young person. They want to progress, not be left behind.
Sabeen also talked about the struggles stemming from misconceptions that might have prevented her from doing the work she did,

The internal struggle is hard enough, and now there are a lot of external struggles related to being a young Muslim in this world due to so many misconceptions. You might think this would prevent me from putting myself out there and trying to educate others. It hasn’t.

She reflected on her experience as a counsellor with the Muslim youth help line, which gave her firsthand knowledge of the struggles other Muslim youth faced due to Islamophobia and negative stereotypes,

People call in and are very confused about their identities. What should they accept as part of their identity and what not? It wouldn’t be like this if there weren’t so many stereotypes about Muslims. We would have it easier – focusing on the internal struggle, not so much the external struggle.

I can also relate to what the participants are saying here. Due to these negative perceptions that are so prevalently discussed in the media, my own activism, and its various public expressions have at times made me reflect on the potential negative impact it may have on career opportunities and relationships with friends and family. At times, particularly during moments of extreme tension, I would cease from participating as the threat became very real to me.

So in a sense, the injustice they felt from the threat of possible negative outcomes due to media misrepresentation and Islamophobic discourse in the mainstream was actually the very thing that fuelled their desire to contend with the root of the problem and educate and inform others. This fuelled desire was combined with a clear understanding of one’s rights to pursue this type of work.

I’m not afraid of speaking up and speaking to the media. But that's because I have a very strong understanding of what my rights are and not everyone has that
understanding. They're confused about what will get them into trouble and what won’t. The only problem is that the media doesn’t seek people like me. (Laila)

Laila’s confidence in her own understanding of her rights was similar to the other participants. This confidence is what differentiated these activists from other young Muslims.

In her quote, Laila also referred to another layer of the issues with media and youth activism. In her opinion, the media does not necessarily want to talk to Muslim youth activists – the ones who in her opinion are willing to talk and discuss the real issues. The media instead defers to adult Muslims, who are not a forthcoming community given their own fears about perceptions and drawing attention to themselves.

[The media] will call up any random mosque or person that they can get a hold of because our community is not very forthcoming. Those who are interviewed claim to speak on behalf of everyone - like Tarek Fatah - and the majority may not even relate to their views. Those are the people the media goes to because they are accessible. (Laila)

I was intrigued to learn that the youth maintain consciousness for the role they can play in not just critiquing various forms of Islamophobia, but also improve the situation themselves. Melissa and Yasmin’s activism was about critiquing the media specifically. One might argue that writing for a blog is more passive than active, however these youth would tend to disagree as they were both very clear about purpose of the blog being to create a shift in consciousness. Their blog, which generates between 1000-2000 hits per day, critiques various media portrayals of Muslims. Why did they feel this is important work?

It’s important because the media has such an important role in shaping how people see Islam, especially those who don't have a lot of contact with Muslims. So it’s important to point out what’s wrong with that. To say the media isn't
portraying a neutral story, that it’s political. To analyze and shed light on what stories are told, how and what language is used is really important. (Melissa)

The use of blogging as a communication tool to educate others is not surprising given the findings that global youth in general and Muslim youth in particular are of the technological and communications revolution generation where new information communication technologies (ICT) has changed the way in which youth learning, culture, sociability and political engagement occur. According to Bayat & Herrera (2010), this means that, “on a massive and growing scale, youth use the new media as a tool for peer interaction, leisure, consumption, generating and consuming information, and an array of direct and indirect political action – uses that are not mutually exclusive” (p. 10).

Furthermore,

Among global youth in general, but Muslim youth in an even more pronounced way, there appears to be a growing generational consciousness, diffused in part through the new media, about issues of social justice and human rights accompanied by a profound moral outrage at the violation of fundamental rights. Young people blog, sing, protest, agitate, join formal and informal organizations, and find myriad other ways to claim their rights and assert their will for justice, livelihoods, and lifestyles (Bayat & Herrera, 2010, p. 11).

Finally, despite the challenges of their work, these youth also experienced positive signs of change through the work that they did in informing others of media misrepresentations and correcting stereotypes that permeated mainstream discourse. This in turn encouraged them to continue to pursue their work. For example, Melissa shared that, “for a lot of people who are feeling marginalized in the media, we get people regularly comment on the blog, saying thank you for writing that.” Melissa also commented, “it may not change the media representations, but it certainly validates other young Muslims’ reactions to the media and that is important”.


**Community and Belonging**

The notion of belonging evolved as a key motivation for all of the participants. I reflect on Melissa’s comment and the importance of feeling represented. This in itself is a crucial part of each of the participants’ motivations and purpose of becoming active: to feel represented and to help others feel represented. Not only did these young activists want to feel represented and took that into their own hands, they wanted to take it one step further and become part of a community.

It’s a cool group and I’ve become good friends with some of the members. We support another too, for example if we see an article that upsets us, we write each other. There is a sense of community. (Melissa)

Each of the participants brought up the notion of community – and the longing to be a part of one. The fact that this theme appeared again and again in the context of activism in post-9/11 Canada suggests that the two may be related. In other words, is post-9/11 Canada the cause of this desire to be a part of something, to find an identity elsewhere because their Canadian identify is being questioned and their Canadian community is turning its back on them?

In her discussion on Islamic subcultures as a form of student resistance to Eurocentrism in schools, Zine articulates that the “social infrastructure” of interaction, cohesion and support is a key element to Muslim youth organizing of this form (Zine, 2000). According to Zine, this form of organizing achieved collective agency and the use of positive peer support in response to an environment which often excludes them. (Zine, 2000). Sabeen, whose activism involves work with the MSA of her university echoed this trait of the group, commenting on some of the personal benefits to being part of this activist group,
My experience has been so rewarding in the MSA. We work together towards a common goal, and built friendships and relationships with people we can connect to. One reason we have to be involved is to take care of ourselves – to be around others that think like you do – that you’re not on this path alone. Others are there for you. This feeling of community is hard to get if you are not involved.

Aiesha comments on points out that it is not just the connection to a cultural or religious community that helps sustain her activism – that in the mosque based youth group she is involved people from different faiths and cultures are engaged.

The different people I’ve met there, the different people I bring there, it gives you a community feel. You see familiar faces, people who don’t judge you. The different religions and ethnicities that are involved and are saying the same thing you are really validates what we feel as Muslims – because it’s not just us who sees us. Its not biased. I think it’s important to have a community base, to discuss issues, and perspectives without feeling judged or that someone will take what you say and use it against you. We actually want to work with this community, not isolate ourselves.

Werbner’s study discussing the pluralisation of South Asian (namely Pakistani), Muslim disasporic public sphere in Britain supports the idea that anti-war protesting demonstrates a politics of alliance rather than of confrontation or isolation, as popular discourse suggests (Werbner, 2004). The alliances cross religious and cultural divides and highlight the principal notion of community within the discussion of Muslim youth activism. Laila might want to check reflected on her own feelings at anti-war protests since 9/11 at which activists from different faith, cultural and political groups were present and demonstrated solidarity with the Muslim community. “It meant a lot to see that and I think we [Muslims] really appreciated the support. We are actually one community – and it felt really good to be a part of it.”

On Being Female

As mentioned in the methodology section of this study, I did not set out to have a group of participants that solely consisted of females. Out of curiosity, I asked the
participants if there were males in the various groups that they were a part of. Three out of the seven groups represented by the participants had a small number of males who would also consider themselves activists. The fact that only females responded with interest in participating is worthy of study in itself. It is important to note that other studies on Muslim youth and activism do not conclude that there are more female than male activists (Maira, 2009; Sirin & Fine 2008; Bullock & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011).

I asked the participants how being a woman might have influenced and informed their work and vice versa. The overall response was that gender did not play a huge role in what they did as activists, but it did not go unnoticed. Sara, Laila and Sabeen each commented on how they felt that it was harder to speak up and be listened to as a female activist versus a male activist.

As a girl it’s harder to speak out. At first, I never thought about being a woman in this work – didn’t think it mattered. But I’m sure that it’s harder for me to get my word out. (Sara)

The participants did feel that their work informed their conception and understanding of their own femaleness. Sara, Aiesha, Laila and Nur each felt that their activism – even though it did not touch upon women’s rights – made them more aware of the notion of women’s rights and created a sense of pride in being a female activist when they realized people were listening to them. Further, Melissa discussed the importance of being gender conscious when working to dispel false representations of Muslims in the media,

I think its interesting because often in looking at representation we are looking at sexism as well, with something like Islam, there are two ways of talking about it and women and men are talked about entirely differently. When people bring up Islamophobia in general, it’s the male stereotype that comes up – male terrorism, violence etc. For women, most of the time we are talked about as oppressed and covered up.
She further discusses the impact that writing about misrepresentations of Muslims in the media has had on her personal ideas of being a female Muslim,

Its made me aware of what Islam really says about gender and these issues. I discovered that there are so many messages [about being a Muslim woman] that are propagated by both Muslims and non-Muslims and they are totally wrong. In a weird way, it has taught me more about what being a Muslim woman is really about.

Yasmin felt her gender made her activist work significantly different from her male counterparts. She discusses the challenges she faces being a female activist, but also highlights that being a female activist in itself serves to counter narratives of the oppressed Muslim woman. She explains,

I think it makes a huge difference. With the blog, you have to have an understanding of what it’s like to be a women and not have same privileges as men, being a women gives insight into why these images are not helpful to anyone. I realize from a non-Muslim perspective, I feel a responsibility as a woman to show that I am not oppressed, and there is a level that comes into my work and my writing, underlying I know I’m a Muslim women, and if a non-Muslim is reading this, they may take me more seriously, they might see that I don’t have the same investment in defending Islam (i.e. if their main opinion is that Muslim women are oppressed), so there is a legit reason why I’m writing this. So people see that I am a Muslim woman, independent, and they may read that different than if I was a man, so in some ways its good for us, because we are presenting Muslims in a better light. But it’s sad because it gets at how non-Muslims view us as oppressed. When people I meet come to know what I do, they are taken aback, especially Muslim guys, and some people think I’m maybe too opinionated and critical for women. And I don’t know if it’s because I’m Muslim, south Asian, or just a women, but they see me as a bit too harsh or mean person. I have gotten that kind of response from people, why are you being so mean or so critical, that’s not so feminine of you. I’ve also gotten a lot of support too at the same time, and they are impressed, it’s a mixed response.

The hijab was another source of contention as a powerful female symbol that could hold different meanings for these women activists and the people they were trying to affect through their work. The hijab has had several meanings and interpretations historically, contrary to the colonial images of the hijab as backwards and oppressive that have
remained static in Western narratives (Razack, 1998). Out of the seven participants, two wore a hijab, one had just started making the transition to wearing a hijab, and two others had been seriously contemplating wearing a hijab for a number of years. When asked what they felt the role of hijab was in Islam, all but one felt that hijab was an individual decision, and shied away from overtly expressing an opinion on whether there was a definitive yes or no answer to whether or not hijab was a mandatory part of the religion.

We discussed the commonly held opinion among “moderate” Muslims in the West is that hijab not only refers to the headdress, but it means modesty and refers to modesty in dress as well as in thought, or how one carries oneself in society. Regardless of what they believed about whether or not it was mandated in the faith, why was it that the most of the participants had an inclination towards it? Based on the comments, it seemed to me that to the participants, wearing the hijab was in large part like wearing a label – one that they were proud to wear, and one that they felt was becoming increasingly important to draw attention to if they were going to continue their work in activism. Wearing the hijab meant asserting one’s Muslimness, and when asked, the participants felt that the hijab was a highly internal and personal decision, and wearing the hijab was also clearly about sending a message to everyone about who they were and what they stood for. Sara, who had begun the transition of wearing hijab by wearing it in select environments responded,

I’m more conscious when I’m wearing it [the hijab], and I make more of an effort to talk to people who are not Muslim [so that they can hear my Canadian accent]. I want people to know that I’m Canadian and I’m Muslim, and wearing the hijab was my choice. I choose to do it, I’m not forced to, I’m not oppressed.
For Sara, it was evident that wearing the hijab was part of her mission to educate people and break down stereotypes and misrepresentations of Muslims.

For Sabeen, who wore an abaya and a hijab, wearing “Islamic clothing” did not begin as a choice as it was simply part of how her parents raised her. After 9/11, however, her parents suggested that she take off her abaya and hijab in order to “not stand out as a Muslim”, something they felt would protect her from having to face racism and backlash that had become widespread against Muslims and anyone who looked Muslim (Razack, 2008). Sabeen chose not to adhere to her parents’ suggestion and chose not to succumb to the fear that many Muslims in Canada found themselves confronted with. “Basically he was afraid that if I looked too much like a Muslim I would experience negative consequences or I would be harassed. But I decided I was fine.”

One of the participants felt differently about how to respond to popular beliefs in the media which understood the hijab as an oppressive symbol. Laila was quite sensitive to reports of how women with hijabs and men with beards were being targeted and mistreated and misrepresented in the media.

I openly interact with members of Toronto 18. The difference with why the media doesn’t hunt me down is that I don’t wear a hijab. There is a difference. Those who do wear it are targeted and the media is more offensive towards them than they are with me.

Regardless of whether the participants were for or against wearing a hijab for themselves, all of them demonstrated a sense of fearlessness about it, which was uplifting to hear given the fact that they were all also very aware of the fact that a woman wearing a hijab would be judged negatively by media and the general public.
According to Jouili (2006), in France, many pious Muslim women are intentionally highlighting their visibility to the world by donning hijabs. “They do so in an attempt to mark and claim a presence in the public sphere” (Bayoumi, 2010, p. 171). Similarly, Amir-Moazami (2010) argues that donning the hijab is a matter of “distinction” for these young women in that it constitutes a whole set of cultivating virtues that make them distinct from other (i.e. uncovered) women. Amir-Moazami notes that the stigma attached to the hijab is turned into positive capital by young Muslim women who declare the hijab as elements of free choice and self-respect (Amir-Moazami, 2010, p. 196).

Overall, though their activism the participants gained a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a Muslim woman in a post-9/11 environment, compelling them to take on the challenges of breaking down stereotypes about the oppressed veiled Muslim woman, and creating a higher level of consciousness in themselves about this aspect of their identities. If one is to see a silver lining to the post-9/11 environment in Canada, Sara explains that it is the impact that it has had on developing who she is – her identity. She expressed a sort of appreciation for the struggles she had encountered, “it taught me a lot. You have to learn to protect yourself from misinformed people and have to learn about Islam in order to re-educate those that are misinformed.” This development of identity, of growth in the knowledge of themselves, and further, their knowledge of Islam, has resulted in a greater confidence for each of the women.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

“It is our responsibilities to come up with the ideas [to fight injustice]. It’s great if they [government] could do it – but no one will, it’s the power of the people that will do it. I have an optimistic attitude. A lot of these issues bother me, but at some point I figure you have to stop blaming, and do something. I’m looking towards the future, what can I do to make things better?” (Nur)

The goal of this study was to voice to young Muslims in Toronto and understand the motivations behind the work of youth who chose to participate in social-justice activism despite various pressures, obstacles and disincentives provided in a post-9/11 environment. In asking the main research question, “What motivates young Muslim activists?”, the objective was to gain insight into these young individuals and understand how and why they are able to do the work they do. Through the lens of a spiritualized, integrative, anti-racism and anti-colonialism approach, using interventive in-depth interviewing, the main themes that were found include the role of spirituality in Muslim youth activism, the attachment to Canadian identity and Canadian community at large, the desire to educate and correct misrepresentations through activism, and notions of community and belonging in general.

At the end of the very personal discussions in which these young women shared the stories behind their choice to be fearless and active in a time when anti-Muslim narratives have the potential of impacting their relationships, their careers, and their livelihoods, the participants reflected on what they would like to see for Canada’s future and expressed their recommendations for how we can get there.

When the participants were asked about their opinion on the level of youth participation in activism, all of them indicated that there should be more young people involved in responding to post-9/11 Islamophobia and other related challenges. We
discussed some of the reasons why their peers made the decision to not be involved in activism related to post-9/11 issues and how this situation could be improved.

Many of my friends don’t want to get involved because they think they will become a target. They think if you associate with Muslims you will get in trouble. They don’t want to get in trouble by association. Like what Toronto 18 is about. My friends also feel distant from this stuff, that it’s not their problem; they don’t want to deal with it. (Laila)

Laila makes a number of observations regarding Muslim youth and activism: that experience of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim discourse which has manifestations in law and order create a fear among Muslim youth preventing them from participating in activism; for others who have not been affected in large or small part by post-9/11 issues, or have not critically analyzed their experiences, the connection between their lives and the lives of other Muslims who are affected are often not made. As such, they feel distant from the issues. The feeling of not wanting to “deal with it” can also be considered an effect of feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues and their impact on the lives of Muslims.

The imperative for more youth to get involved and for the activism work that the participants are involved in to continue was very clear.

I don’t see these stereotypes and racism going away. We need to have youth educated, engaged, and aware. So to continue the discussion and our work. We need to use our skills and education to do more than our parents have done. (Sara)

People can’t deny the racism that exists. I want to see more youth getting out there, getting educated, giving back to their communities, and having children and involving them as well. The work just has to continue. (Sabeen)

With regards to how to get young people involved, the participants felt strongly about the role of education in recruiting youth, and the responsibility of the Muslim community at
large to take both the future of activism and the future of the community into their own hands.

**Role of Institutions**

Overall, the participants did not feel that government could play a significant role in supporting their activism and in helping to improve the situation for Muslims in Canada. They felt that Orientalist and Islamophobic discourses were entrenched in government institutions and very little could be expected from them. Instead, the participants commented on the role schools and universities could play in supporting activism on campuses and providing a space for educating on misrepresentations of Islam.

It’s a step-by-step process. I don’t think government is anti-Muslim really but I think that we can always improve where we are on our own. For example, I notice that the curriculum is not diverse in my program at school. There is no training [for teachers] on educating ourselves about different communities, which is important. (Sabeen)

I think it would be helpful if universities and schools were more open to spirituality and religion. I think we should look at who is teaching the courses on Islam, for example. Are they biased? (Nur)

I don’t know how much support we can expect from governments when they are xenophobic and I don’t see that changing. Through their rhetoric they paint all Muslims as foreign. With universities and schools its much easier I would think to make some changes. Although there is still exclusion that happens in schools, I think students have a lot more say and more power in schools. So we need to educate youth about the issues on campuses because that is where they will be engaged. (Yasmin)

Government or schools sadly won’t just say ‘we want to learn about Muslims or Islam’. The responsibility lies in our hands to make a change wherever we are in our lives. (Laila)

Laila’s comment reflects the strong sentiment among the participants that although their activism is in large part working to critique and change opinions of people outside of the
community, at the end of the day, they believe that a great burden of responsibilities lies at the grassroots rather than relying upon the authority of institutions to make the change they seek.

**Importance of Education**

The participants advocated for education as a means to not only deconstruct and dispel negative media representations and stereotypes of Muslims, but also valued the role of education in engaging with other Muslim youth and encouraging their participation in this activism.

In the future I think there will be more cases like the Toronto 18. We would hope that there are more knowledgeable Muslims in the community who will step up and do something. I hope by then we have some established think tanks that are doing studies on Muslims, more resources and a more developed community. More educated people within. Not that we don’t have that now, but we need more. We have a lot of professionals, but more psychologists, sociologists, so that we have the resources and tools to help each other out in all areas. (Nur)

Nur discusses the importance of education among Muslims to develop a community of intellectuals and professionals that can be called upon for support. This is an important critique of the fragmented Muslim community in Canada, which on the one hand is not surprising given the diversity and plurality among Muslims in Canada, but on the other hand is a common source of contention and frustration given the resulting lack of ability to organize and support one another.

An opinion contrary to tropes of Canadian multiculturalism, which serve to segregate minority groups, Melissa’s hope for Muslims is to be considered “just regular Canadians”:

If more people are properly educated, in the future we could see Muslims become more part of the mainstream in Canada. I mean, I think we are still seen as
foreigners regardless of whether we have been born here or the skin colour we have. I like to see the idea of being Muslim, normalized. To be at a point were being a Muslim is like being a Christian or Jewish. We just are. I’d like to see Muslims in positions of influence, I’d like to see Muslim characters on TV, and it not be essentialized. Things like this where Muslims are just seen as other Canadians…and people won’t think twice about it. (Melissa)

**Our Responsibility**

We have to move forward. We are Canadian Muslims, and we want to do well. Our parents came here for us. We are not going to solve any problems or break barriers if we are not out there doing something. (Nur)

The participants repeatedly shared their thoughts on the onus that lies on Muslims to play a role in not just critiquing the post-9/11 environment in Canada, but to play a role in reshaping it for themselves.

As Muslims it is important to be active and speak for ourselves, and stand up as Canadian Muslims and say, ‘look, this is our media too, this is our country too’. When people talk about the West versus East, we need to say ‘we’re here too, to claim that space and leave us out is wrong’. (Melissa)

The Islamophobia now is accepted. If we don’t challenge this acceptance, it’s just going to get worse. It’s important for people to realize this activism is important to stop things from getting worse; otherwise it will just go downhill. (Laila)

I feel a responsibility, if I don’t do these things, it will get worse. Someone has to be out there challenging the racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. There is a need, it has to be done, it’s not easy, it’s tiring, it’s frustrating, but I keep thinking that it’s absolutely necessary. If we don’t do it, who will? (Aiesha)

I hope we are less afraid. Fear doesn’t help. If we are afraid we become robots. We just ‘do’, mechanically. When we speak with consciousness we are more aware and we can make a difference. (Laila)

According to the participants, feeling the imperative and responsibility is the first key step; the second is to become organized. As mentioned previously, the participants expressed their frustration about the fragmented Muslim community and although most of them understood that this was a corollary of the diversity and heterogeneity among
them, they still voiced their hopes for a future that would see more interconnection and support.

Muslims need to be more active in challenging ideas and questioning the way we are being seen. The younger generation has the burden to make sure this happens. It’s unfair that we have to do this, but it’s the responsibility we have to be out there and we be vocal, whether its through volunteering, working with day cares, homeless shelters, or protesting in the streets. We really need to continue to put ourselves out there into the world. (Sara)

We need scholarships for young Muslims, to become lawyers, for example, so we have people to fight for us. We need more money for families to who don’t have money to start businesses so that they can prosper. We need to take care of each other. (Sabeen)

I hope we are more organized than our parents’ generation. Any media we speak to, they say, well its very hard to get someone from the Muslim community who will speak about the issue, who is actually knowledgeable about the issue; they call up and random mosque or person. I hope that in future generations will be a bit more organized and connected. And that we will have more connections to each other. (Nur)

Areas for Future Study and Concluding Thoughts

The voices of the participants in this study and the resulting analysis will be an important addition to the existing literature on Muslim youth in post-9/11 Canada.

Although this study was not extensive and as such may not be representative of all young Muslim activists in Toronto, the findings are in line with other studies on young Muslims and activism in Canada and the US, suggesting the relevance of key issues and ideas.

This study will support literature for educators in the Greater Toronto Area who need to understand the changing environment in which their students are living, and this includes providing space for supporting young Muslims and their efforts to dispel stereotypical anti-Muslim narratives through re-education.
As discussed, the desire to re-educate was a theme that continued to appear in the interviews. “Being uneducated is what results in the politicians making decisions that are Islamophobic, and being uneducated is why the public lets them get away with that” (Sara). Education is what these young women all believed was the key to positive change – and not just for the non-Muslim community:

Even Prophet Muhammad, peace is upon him, advocated for education. He said ‘Go all the way to China to learn and become learned’. Islam teaches us to think, use our minds, read. We need this as much as they do. (Laila)

Future study on young Muslim activists would benefit from a larger participant group, more representative of the diversity in Toronto. Given that it is Muslim males who are more often victims of Islamophobic policies (Razack, 2008), studies with a significant male participant base would result in an important analysis of the issues from this perspective. Further, a more diverse and detailed study would look at the implications on Muslim youth activism of ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic class, disability and the unique histories of these communities in Canada.

The seven participants of this study provide us with insight into this negotiation and, in line with other studies of young Muslims and young Muslim activists in North America, what we discover is perhaps surprising considering the mainstream narratives on Muslim youth which emphasize their alienation from their fellow Canadians and their susceptibility to anti-Western ideology (Bullock & Nesbit-Larking, 2011). The findings support the literature that suggests that contrary to popular opinion, all Muslims living in the West did not give up their Western identities for their Muslim identities after 9/11. In fact, while exalted narratives of the national subject force these youth to have to think about their Muslimness and attempt to articulate it within the confines of the nation state,
their Muslimness still remains only one aspect of what makes up the identity and experience of young Muslims in Canada.

The activism of the women I interviewed for this study demonstrate a small sample of the types of efforts being undertaken by young Muslims who choose to ‘do something’ in response to an environment of Islamophobia in Canada. Situating the discussion in the context of the political, social, and personal realities of post-9/11 Canada allows us connect the impact of global politics to the everyday lived experiences of Muslim youth in Canada. It is inevitable that these young Muslims have been shaped by these politics. Questions of identity, being and belonging make up the daily negotiating these young Muslim activists find themselves a part of as they play an important role in the reshaping of these same politics.

These young activists have chosen to do this through being highly critical, yet actively engaging with the world around them. They cooperate but are not coopted. Conscious of their role as the next generation of decision-makers, inspired by the Islamic imperative to improve their own condition, and unscathed by the trials of Islamophobia, these young Muslims choose to be active because they feel it is time for a new voice in the West, and they will not give up until it is heard.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A - Muslim Youth Interview Guide

Introduction:
- Introduce self
- Explain project
- Review Letter of Consent, show copy of signed consent form
- Review right to withdraw
- Gain verbal consent to continue with interview
- Sign Letter of Consent

Interview Number:

Participation in community group –
1. Can you tell me a bit about the group that you are involved with?
   a. What led you to join the group?
   b. What role do you play in the group?
   c. What does your family think about your participation in this group?
   d. Do you think the group influences other youth or people in the community? How?

Response to post-9/11 issues –
2. Do you know of other groups like this in Toronto?
   a. Are many youth are getting involved?

Thoughts on the larger context –
3. Based on what you have identified as issues Muslim youth are facing, what would you like to see happen in the future (e.g. 5 years, 10 years) in regards to the issues Muslims and Muslim youth are dealing with today?
   a. Do you think schools supports what you are doing?
   b. Do you think government supports what you are doing?
   c. Do you have any ideas on how you can get this support?

- Express thanks
- Further explanation of how this interview will be used
Appendix B - Introductory Emails/Phone Script

1. Recruitment email to be sent to potential participants by my contacts

Dear friends,

Please take a look at this request for research participants; I think you would be a great candidate:

“Salaam!

My name is Jabeen Aslam, I’m a student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

I will be conducting interviews for a research study I am doing. The purpose of my study is to gain insight into the experience of Muslim youth in the context of post-9/11 Canada.

I’m looking for participants who fit the following criterion:

• Self-identified Muslim. (This includes individuals born into a Muslim family and/or individuals who were not born into a Muslim family but have chosen to embrace Islam. Please note that this study does not exclude certain sects or ethnic groups within the Muslim community)

• Age 18-30

• Currently participating in a community group related to addressing post-9/11 issues.

• Living in Canada for at least 10 years

If you are a Muslim youth and fit the description above, please contact me as soon as possible! This is your opportunity to contribute to important research about and for our community, InshAllah.

Salaam,

Jabeen”

Please contact me by April 1st if you would like to be contacted by Jabeen to learn more about this project.
2. Initial email contact with participant/phone script

Salaam ________ !

Thanks for getting back to me about your interest in participating in my research study.

As I mentioned in the email that (name of contact) sent you, in the next month I will be conducting interviews for a research study I am doing. The purpose of my study is to gain insight into the experience of Muslim youth in the context of post-9/11 Canada.

Just to tell you a bit about myself, I’m a 28-year-old, first generation Pakistani female. My parents moved to Toronto about 35 years ago from Pakistan. I’ve lived in Toronto my entire life and did my undergraduate studies at U of T. I have a passion for anti-racism and equity studies and hope that my study can contribute to the work being done about and for the Muslim community in Canada. I believe that through the work that we do as activists and educators, we are making positive change.

I am attaching the Letter of Consent that you would have to sign before we can start our interview. Among many details, it explains that the interview will take place using open-ended questions that will allow you to share your experiences and that the interview will take place in a location that you specify – a place that you feel most comfortable. The letter also explains that you can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. The interview will be used in my thesis and the study might be published. Your name and identity will be anonymous.

Take a look at the letter, and if you feel comfortable with this, email me back with any questions or concerns. If and when you are comfortable to go ahead, we can book an interview time.

Many thanks for your interest, I’m very excited about this project and look forward to learning from you!

Salaam,

Jabeen
Appendix C - Letter of Consent

Date:

To the participants in this study,

The purpose of the proposed study is to gain insight into the experience of Muslim youth in the context of post-9/11 Canada. The study aims to give a voice to Canadian Muslim. The specific group of Muslim youth that this study will focus on is Muslim youth (age 18-30) participating in community groups related to addressing post-9/11 issues.

This study will interview 4-6 Muslim youth from 3 different community groups. There will be a balance between male and female participants. For the purpose of this study, the participants must be self-identified as Muslims. This will include individuals born into a Muslim family and/or individuals who were not born into a Muslim family but have chosen to embrace Islam.

It is important to note that this study will not exclude certain sects or ethnic groups within the Muslim community. Individuals who have been living in Canada for less than 10 years will not be included, as it is important that participants have “grown up” in Canada. The age group of the youth will be restricted to youth that are a minimum of 18 years of age and a maximum of 30.

This Canadian-based study will be carried out in Toronto, Ontario under the supervision of Dr. Njoki Nathani Wane, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a Masters Degree thesis and perhaps for subsequent publications.

During the interview you will be asked questions about your participation in the group and your ideas and thoughts pertaining to the future of the work that you do.

As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views and experiences. After the interview, I will write brief notes that will be used to assist me in remembering the surroundings of the interview (i.e., characteristics of the site).

It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in my office which is a secure location. All information collected will only be seen by myself and my supervisor, Dr. Njoki Wane, who may review some of the interview data for evaluative purposes.

All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons cannot be identified. Pseudonyms will be used in the analysis, final thesis paper and in published works. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.
You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. As a participant, you have the right to choose to withdraw at any point in the research process by contacting me via phone or email. The reasons for withdrawal do not have to be explained to me, however withdrawal indicates a complete removal of your involvement in the research project and information will not be used in any form.

You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project.

At no time will value judgements will be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a member of the community group you work with.

Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

Please note that you will not be compensated monetarily for your participation in this study. Your participation will contribute to a study that I feel will greatly benefit the members of the Muslim community and those organizations with whom we work – schools, government, other community organizations.

Please note that signing of this letter requests your permission for participation, permission for use of your interview in the final thesis paper, and permission for use of your interview in potential published works based on this research.

Please feel free to use the contacts below of myself and/or Dr. Wane should you have questions or concerns. Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant, please contact the Ethics Review Office: 416-946-3273, ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Jabeen Aslam
Candidate, Sociology and Equity Studies in Education

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Dr. Njoki Nathani Wane
Professor, Sociology and Equity in Studies in Education

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Phone: 416-978-xxxx
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By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Name: _____________________________________
Signed: ____________________________________
Date: ______________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _____

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audiotape: _____

Thank you, I look forward to working with you!