Informing Identities:
Religious Conversion Experiences of Muslims in the
Toronto Area

by

Elysia Guzik

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Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which information seeking, evaluation, and sharing practices mediate the conversion experiences of Muslims living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). This research contributes to Information Studies and interdisciplinary literature on conversion by adding insight into information practice in a religious context, particularly one that is characterized by a critical transition and situated within a contentious political landscape.

Research was guided by an interpretive ethnographic approach. Data collection involved participant observation at religious conventions, education classes, discussion groups, and social gatherings hosted by convert support organizations over a 14-month period; semi-structured narrative interviews with 13 Muslim converts and two of their spouses; timeline drawings with ten research participants; a guided tour with one pilot study participant; and journal entries written by three pilot study participants.
Findings are framed by three themes: navigation, authority, and expression; these themes correspond with the concepts of seeking, evaluating and sharing information. They describe participants’ experiences of finding their way through new information systems and social networks; assessing sources’ trust, relevance, and authenticity; and presenting religious commitments through their bodies, vocabulary, and creative pursuits. Findings suggest that rather than being peripheral to religious experience, information practice is integral to how participants develop their religious identities and articulate their connection to local and global Muslim communities. This study extends the idea that everyday information practices involve not only interactions with written documentary sources such as books, websites, and social media, but also embodied forms of expression such as clothing, movements, words, and verbal references to key issues and debates, historical moments, influential figures, social norms and activities in the communities with which people identify.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1 Research problem
My research is motivated by two main considerations. The first has to do with gaps in existing literature – namely, the limited attention to spirituality in studies of information practice, and the lack of attention to information practice in studies of religious conversion. Research on information seeking and use continues to focus on secular settings such as public and academic libraries, schools, and workplaces, leaving studies of information practice in spiritual contexts on the margins. Although some scholars over the last decade have started to investigate the connections between information and religion, this emerging area of study tends to examine how Christian clergy and religious leaders look for information to prepare sermons and administer churches (e.g., Michels, 2014; Michels, 2012; Roland, 2011; Roland & Wicks, 2009). Such research ignores Islam, the fastest growing religion in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011a). To expand information practice research and the growing body of literature on information and spirituality, studies of underrepresented religious contexts and communities are imperative. In line with this research objective, my dissertation explores how Muslim converts’ religious identities are constructed through their information practices, including the ways in which they pursue knowledge related to Islam\(^1\). Additionally, my dissertation is an effort to extend previously disparate bodies of literature on conversion to Islam (e.g., Poston, 1992; Suleiman & The New Muslims Project, 2013; van Nieuwkerk, 2006) and information practice in the profound aspects of human experience (e.g., Gorichanaz, 2016a; Kari & Hartel, 2007; Latham, 2013). Since conversion is more complex than religious beliefs and traditions alone, my research brings together concepts and perspectives from Information Studies and the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion.

\(^1\) For the purposes of my research, Muslim converts refers to individuals who formerly self-identified as non-religious, or as adherents of a faith tradition other than Islam, and have experienced a process in which they re-examined personal frameworks and began to self-identify as Muslims (Mansson McGinty, 2007). I use the term Muslim as an adjective to describe one who adheres to Islam as one’s religion, since this definition acknowledges various ways of interpreting Islamic faith, and the dynamics among religious identities and cultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions (Bullock, 2012).
Secondly, at a time when acts of terrorism by radicalized Islamic groups and individuals are in the news and political speeches daily, there is a continued need to work towards countering negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. Particularly in North America, Islam is closely tied to media, policy, and public discourses that are dominated by issues of cultural accommodation and threats to national and international security. These discourses stem from and perpetuate the idea that Muslims are violent and monolithic in their customs and beliefs. While conversion to Islam has become an increasingly popular topic for social science research and mainstream media since the events of September 11, 2001 (Moosavi, 2014), research on Muslims’ lived experiences that are unrelated to terrorism and security remains scarce (Clarke, 2013). Conversations and debates about what it means to be Muslim in North America (and in particular, in a major metropolitan area) and how to reconcile seemingly conflicting identities have become especially timely during the course of my research. My fieldwork began only a few months before Michael Zehaf-Bibeau’s fatal shooting of Nathan Cirillo at the national war memorial in Ottawa, Ontario², and my writing culminated in the months that followed terrorist threats and events in Strathroy³, Orlando⁴, Baghdad, Nice, al-Qaa, and elsewhere.

My dissertation research project evolved from a series of conversations and classes. When I applied to doctoral programs, I knew that I wanted to study the relationship between religion and information seeking and use, which I thought deserved more attention in the information behaviour literature. I was inspired by the work of Jarkko Kari – who focused on information seeking related to spirituality and extraordinary phenomena (Kari, 2001), and the uses and effects of spiritual information (Kari, 2009) – and his collaboration with Jenna Hartel on “the

² Instead of acknowledging Zehaf-Bibeau’s criminal history, mental health and addiction issues, and adoption of a radicalized, sectarian version of Islamic theology, the response by media outlets primarily focused on Zehaf-Bibeau’s identity as a Canadian-born Muslim convert.

³ On August 10, 2016, Canadian-born Muslim convert and ISIS sympathizer Aaron Driver died in Strathroy, Ontario after detonating an explosive device (which injured himself and one other person) and issuing a threat to bomb a public area in an urban centre.

⁴ On June 12, 2016 – in the middle of the month of Ramadan – an American Muslim named Omar Mateen shot and killed 49 people, injuring 53 others, at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. In the days that followed, activist, student, and community groups in the GTA came together in vigils, memorials, and Pride month celebrations. At a memorial held at the University of Toronto, university administrators, social justice activists, and campus chaplains paid their respects through spoken reflections shared with the students, staff, and faculty members gathered at the Memorial Benches. One verse cited by the Muslim Chaplain stood out: “whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved all of humanity” (Quran 5:32).
pleasurable and the profound in information science” (Kari & Hartel, 2007). The then-fledgling Center for the Study of Information and Religion (CSIR) at Kent State University also validated my research interests, and pointed to work presented at its inaugural conference (e.g. Brenda Dervin’s paper on “Spiritual Knowledge” and the role of religion in sense-making, John A. Walsh’s paper on Christian icons as complex information objects). Religious practice is shaped by the canons and sacred spaces that have evolved out of narratives shared and interpreted over millennia, and both information and religion significantly affect how humans relate to others and the world around them. I wanted to explore the construction of information behaviours within a religious setting, including the role of knowledge sharing in creating meaningful religious experiences and information resources as catalysts for spiritual awareness.

As I tried to narrow the scope of my project, a colleague (a librarian and then-doctoral student from another university) suggested that I might consider researching new members of a religious congregation as they socialized into their new community. I considered focusing on new religious community members, lay ministers, and campus religious fellowship clubs. I was drawn to study converts to Islam in particular because since taking introductory courses on Islam during my undergraduate studies, I was deeply troubled by the disconnect between the rich cultural heritage and diverse religious experiences of Muslims and the overwhelmingly negative and monolithic representation of Islam and Muslims that I observed in contemporary news media and popular culture. Before starting my undergraduate degree, my awareness of Islam and Muslims was limited to events such as the Gulf War and 9/11, people such as Saddam Hussein, and stereotyped villains portrayed in films such as Aladdin. It was only after learning about the contributions of Muslim women and men to the arts, literature, governance, sciences, architecture, medicine, and mathematics, and about the diverse ways of practicing Islam, that I came to appreciate the multiplicity within a religion that is often categorized as a single stigmatized group by mainstream media and some public figures in the GTA and in a broader post-9/11, post-Brexit and post-Trump context.

I recognize that in comparison with the efforts of activists, human rights advocates, and ecumenical chaplains, my project will have little impact on dominant perceptions about Muslims and Islam in the GTA (or, in Canada, North America, or “the West”). Yet in some small way, I
hope that the lived experiences shared in the chapters to follow will contribute to shedding light on the various ways in which Muslim converts learn about their faith and express their religious identities. I hope it will illustrate how participants were compelled to embrace Islam after hearing messages of peace, love, and social justice from friends, neighbours, family members, writers, and teachers. Finally, I hope it will help other information researchers to remember that searching is more than a transaction between a person and a system; it can be a spiritual pursuit unto itself.

2 Response to research problem

By conducting ethnographic fieldwork among local Muslims to explore their information practices, my research intends to address the oversights outlined above. Rather than studying conversion as a faith event (as it might be examined by religious scholars or anthropologists), I am interested in how information mediates conversion experiences. I aim to learn about how the ways in which Muslim converts seek, evaluate, and share information – in its various textual, sensory, and social forms – factor into their experiences of religious transition. To maintain a manageable project scope, my study focuses on adults who have converted, or who consider themselves to be undergoing a process of converting, to Islam and live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). My research engages with the ideas presented in the following three chapters to “abductively” (Cerwonka, 2007, p. 37) develop a conceptual framework to interpret my findings in relation to a broader understanding of the role that information plays in religious transitions. Specifically, my research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What strategies and actions do Muslim converts employ to seek, evaluate, and share information related to their conversion experiences?

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5 That said, I am also mindful of Jennifer Selby’s discussion of the dangerously reductive binaries between “fundamentalists” and “peace-loving Muslims” (2016, p. 73) and the fact that my project relied on my subjective interpretations about what I heard and observed at community events and in interviews with a relatively small group of believers.

6 While I use the terms “converts” and “conversion experiences” here, I recognize that the concept of conversion is an ambiguous one, understood in different ways according to various ontological perspectives. Following theoretical precedents set by anthropologists of religion such as Simon Coleman (2003), Henri Gooren (2010), and Ali Köse (1994, 1999), in this thesis, I take conversion to refer to an ongoing, continuous process rather than a single event marking some kind of “before” and “after” in a person’s life. Not only is conversion to Islam continuous in the sense that it is a lifelong process for individual believers, it may also occur through efforts to convert others or to encourage others to embrace or accept Islam as their religion.
2. How do these information practices help converts to develop and present Muslim identities? While these research questions provide the groundwork for my dissertation, they have been constructed through my efforts to understand participants’ perspectives on the relationship between religion and information in their lives.

3 Chapter outline

This section outlines how the following chapters will proceed. Following this chapter, I review relevant literature from the following areas: information behaviour in everyday life, affect and information behaviour, information research on spirituality, religious conversion, and conversion to Islam in North America and Europe. Chapter Three describes the sensitizing concepts that provide the framework for my research – namely, information practice and “higher things in life” (Kari & Hartel, 2007); religious identity; spiritual literacy and knowledge construction; and information literacy and experience. Chapter Four discusses the methodology that guided how I conducted research, including interpretive ethnography, ethical considerations, data collection methods (i.e. participant observation, semi-structured narrative interviews, journals, guided tours, and timeline drawings), access to field sites and negotiating my position as an outsider, and my process of data analysis and writing. Chapter Five acts as a preface to the findings chapters and Conclusion, as it describes the networked nature of the research context, in addition to temporal and geopolitical considerations. This chapter also introduces the women and men who participated in this research project and includes the timeline drawings they produced during interviews.

Findings chapters are organized thematically into three main themes. Chapter Six, on navigation, illustrates how Muslim converts find their way in their new religious communities through information systems and social networks. Moving between descriptive accounts, I analyze participants’ strategies for assessing the authenticity of sources (print, online, and in-person), obstacles that they encountered, and theological concepts that they invoked to align personal experiences within a religious framework. In Chapter Seven, I explore the theme of authority – the notion of who has the power and qualifications to speak for Islam, and which texts can be trusted to accurately represent Islam. In this chapter, I include excerpts about how Muslim
converts evaluate peer recommendations, articulate their trust in religious scholars and leaders, identify political agendas, and determine the relevance of opinions circulated online and offered during sermons. The final findings chapter, Chapter Eight, is centered around the related themes of expression and exchange. In this chapter, I describe how Muslim converts present themselves within and outside of their religious communities, including the aesthetic decisions they make and the anxieties they sometimes experience with regard to being publicly visible as Muslim. This chapter also details the impact of the political climate on the kinds of information that Muslim converts decide to share, avoid, and conceal.

Chapter Nine, the Conclusion, brings these themes together, and considers how the process of identity formation in the context of conversion to Islam in the GTA is integrated with daily activities of information seeking, evaluation and sharing. These practices are not merely informative in the sense that they help to cultivate knowledge or awareness about Islam, but they also allow Muslim converts to feel that they belong in their religious communities. In this chapter, I draw upon literature on learning and information practice in other contexts of identity construction to explore how studying the experiences of Muslim converts can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role that information plays in transitions and spiritual life. This chapter is divided by three complementary ideas: informing the self through religious practice, constructing spiritual literacy, and social world beyond regional borders. This dissertation concludes with a discussion of the study’s limitations, areas for future research, and its scholarly and practical implications.
1 Information behaviour in everyday life

Because I am primarily interested in exploring the perspectives of laypeople rather than religious leaders or professional clergy, the literature on information behaviour in everyday life settings provides a theoretical foundation for my doctoral research. Research on everyday life information seeking and use is widely credited to have developed from surveys conducted on non-work information seeking in the United States during the 1970s (Savolainen, 1995). While interest in this area continued and qualitative research methods became more widely applied in the 1980s, studies of information behaviour in academic and occupational settings (e.g., among scientists, historians, lawyers, etc.) continued to dominate the field (Savolainen, 1995). In 1986, Brenda Dervin and her colleague Michael Nilan established a foundation for studies of non-work information seeking. They critiqued systems-centered approaches and called for information scholars and practitioners to adopt a user-centered paradigm that focused on how individual citizens seek and use information in their daily lives (Davenport, 2010; Dervin & Nilan, 1986).

While it originates outside of information science, anthropologist Jean Lave and education scholar Etienne Wenger’s work on learning in communities of practice also provides important theoretical foundations for thinking about participatory aspects of conversion experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave’s ideas about learning that takes place in daily life without formal teaching of a set curriculum (Lave, 1982) aligns well with ideas from Savolainen, Dervin, and Bates on everyday information behaviour and practice. They also support ideas about how spiritual literacy is socially constructed.

In addition to Dervin’s contributions, Marcia J. Bates offered the term “life information” (Bates, 1974) in her discussion of sociocultural trends to which American public libraries should respond. According to Bates, “life information” refers to the requisite information for “successful living” (Bates, 1974, p. 53). This includes information about social norms, cultural traditions, and other aspects of daily life that contribute to a person’s “survival and emotional satisfaction” (ibid.). Bates assumes that the public requires “life information” to live successfully in a society.
in which information and media outlets are abundant (Bates, 1974, pp. 52, 58). While Bates’ ideas about “life information” focused on the service implications for public librarians, her attention to communities, and to information for daily living set an important – and under-acknowledged – precedent for future research on information in everyday life settings.

Since the early foundations of everyday life information seeking research, information scholars have studied information seeking and use in contexts such as healthcare (Costello & Murillo, 2014; McKenzie, 2003; McKenzie, 2010; Pettigrew, 1999; Veinot et al., 2013), access to local government and community service information (Durrance, 1982; Durrance, 1988), serious leisure (Burnett, 2009; Gorichanaz, 2015; Hartel, 2010), and the home (Rieh, 2004). Scholars who have examined everyday life information seeking and use among marginalized communities offer especially important theoretical precedents for studying the complex relationship between social exclusion and inclusion that is often part of religious conversion (Bourque, 2006; Hemlow, 2011; Mulderig, 2011; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). For instance, Elfreda Chatman’s ethnographic research on information behaviour among retired women, female prison inmates, and custodial staff found that such “social worlds” were often defined by uncertainty, time constraints, situational information seeking and avoidance – what Chatman referred to as “information poverty” (Chatman, 1991; Chatman, 1992; Chatman, 1999). Contemporary information science literature on the information practices of migrants experiencing settlement into new countries (Allard, 2015; Caidi et al., 2010; Kennan et al., 2011; Quirke, 2014), information access among homeless populations (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012), and the social costs involved in seeking and sharing health information about HIV/AIDS (Veinot et al., 2013) also reflects attention to how people manage socially marginalized status and its associated information access restrictions to solve practical problems in their daily lives.⁷

Despite new directions in information behaviour research away from academic and occupational settings towards everyday life information seeking, this research area has only recently considered information activities and processes inspired by what Jarkko Kari and Jenna Hartel refer to as “higher things in life” (Kari & Hartel, 2007). This movement in Information Studies to

⁷ In my research, as it is informed by ethnography, it has been imperative to refrain from making assumptions about participants’ status, and to only describe participants as being socially marginalized if they self-identify with this terminology.
investigate “higher things in life” is further evidenced by scholars who highlight the careful and often ritualized selection of “small leisure” information sources such as prayers, poems, and drawings to create and maintain happiness in everyday life (Ruthven, 2014).

2 Affect and information behaviour

Information scholars offer important theoretical precedents about the affective dimensions of information seeking and use. The movement to examine the connection between what is often referred to as “affect” and information behaviour has gained traction, following Constance Mellon’s examination of “library anxiety” (Mellon, 1986), Brenda Dervin’s presentation of “sense-making” (Dervin, 1983), and Carol Kuhlthau’s research on the “information search process” (Kuhlthau, 1991). Using data from longitudinal case studies that compared data collected from high school students’ journals, logs, and questionnaires, and interviews with these students after four years of college education about their experiences with searching for information for assigned research papers, Kuhlthau developed a model of the information search process (“ISP”) (Kuhlthau, 1991).

Unlike earlier models which focused primarily on the cognitive aspects of information behaviour (e.g. Belkin, 1978), Kuhlthau’s ISP model featured affective responses to seeking information – namely, uncertainty, optimism, confusion, clarity, confidence, satisfaction, and disappointment (Kuhlthau, 1991). Since then, information behaviour researchers have expanded the theoretical literature on the role of affect in various information settings, and the ways in which affect is connected to processes of coping, managing uncertainty, adapting to new and complex environments, evaluating events, and making choices (Bilal, 2005; Fourie, 2008; Julien & Genuis, 2009; Julien et al., 2013; Latham, 2014; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012; Nahl, 2001; Naveed, 2016; Neal and McKenzie, 2011; Savolainen, 2015). By paying greater attention to the impact of emotions on the approaches people take to looking for, avoiding, concealing,

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8 Affect is defined as the emotional factor that can “promote or hinder information seeking” (Fisher & Julien, 2009, p. 15), depending on the context. Affect influences how “information needs are created” (Fisher & Julien, 2009, p. 17), how people share information with others, and why they value particular people, resources, services, systems, and spaces to access and maintain social connections and obtain relevant information (Fisher & Julien, 2009).

9 These journals and interviews integrated timelines and flow charts.
managing, and circulating information, current conceptualizations of information practice may be extended. The information behaviour literature on affect is an especially important basis for my project, since it articulates a fundamentally personal side of learning and interacting with resources. Conversion involves not only public presentations of the self and interactions with peer believers, but also deeply personal moments of reflection, contemplation, and prayer. As such, it is imperative to consider how a person’s feelings in such moments impact their perceived need to look for resources to learn more, answer questions, and affirm their beliefs. Affect literature preceded information scholarship on spirituality in its attempt to humanize information behaviour from systems-oriented models towards a more holistic perspective that accounts not only for a person’s thought process about retrieving information through a transaction such as a catalogue search, but also their feelings about the system, source, library, or librarian (or other gatekeeper or expert) with whom they interacted to find what they were looking for. This body of literature also encouraged me to be sensitized towards elements of information practice such as how participants feel when their families and neighbours voice negative opinions about Islam when it comes up in the news, and how that feeling influences their decisions to conceal religious artifacts and books when in their company. Finally, as Allaine Cerwonka suggests, affect can also act as a resource for ethnographic researchers to “allow a better understanding of our changing investments in the varied contexts of fieldwork that produces more ethical research, and as a way of tapping into another level of information about the subjects of our research” (Cerwonka, 2007, p. 36).

3 Information research on spirituality

While some suggest that religion and spirituality have distinct meanings, others have recognized the synonymous nature of the two terms. For example, sociologists of religion Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway note that social scientists have traditionally used spirituality to refer to “functional, more intrinsic dimensions of religion” (Marler & Hadaway, 2002, p. 289), in contrast with religion, which denotes “substantive, extrinsic” dimensions (ibid.). Religious studies scholar Robert C. Fuller points to how “spiritual” and “religious” mean “different things to different people” (Fuller, 2001, p. 5) but both terms “connote a belief in a Higher Power of some kind. Both also imply a desire to connect, or enter into a more intense relationship, with
this Higher Power. And, finally, both connote interest in rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors that foster such a connection or relationship” (ibid.). Studies of spiritual and religious contexts and phenomena within information science have also tended towards this interchangeability, and follow inclusive definitions of spirituality that resemble the following one by Jarkko Kari and Arashanipalai Neelameghan in their editorial for The Open Information Science Journal’s special issue on “Information and Spirituality”: “that which is beyond the material, spirits, the extraphysical, ultimate reality, religions, the anomalous, the sacred” (2011, p. 1). Similarly, Anna Stewart and Simon Coleman cite Clifford Geertz’s (1973) influential definition of religion as “a realm of experience in which humans confront ultimate categories of meaning” (Stewart & Coleman, 2015, p. 105). They add that since Geertz’s definition was published, anthropologists have attended to more embodied and mundane aspects of life that intersect with religion (in addition to symbolic ones), including family, politics, expectations about gender roles, sexuality, and economy (ibid.). In public discourse, the main factor that distinguishes religion from spirituality is often defined as affiliation with an organized, institutional congregation (e.g. church, mosque, synagogue), but this does not necessarily account for the ways religion is practiced in everyday life (e.g. adhering to dietary restrictions, celebrating religious holidays at home, wearing clothing that conforms to scriptural guidelines), regardless of a person’s connection to a particular congregation. To further complicate matters, as sociologist of religion Siobhan Chandler points out, the paradox of trying to separate these two concepts is that “spirituality is both religion and not religion” (Chandler, 2011, p. 4). That is to say, a person’s spirituality may be understood as “private interpretations of collective religious symbolism” (Chandler, 2011, p. 5) yet it may also refer to “alternative/holistic spirituality” (Chandler, 2011, p. 36) that has no connection to organized religion (ibid.). For my research, I acknowledge these various definitions and focus on what participants expressed about their conversion experiences on their own terms. Since many participants understood religion and spirituality as intertwined, I view these terms as concepts along the same spectrum – which often overlap with each other – rather than mutually exclusive solitudes.

Empirical studies of information behaviour and practice in religious and spiritual contexts are part of an emerging field of research, yet a few information and communication scholars who acknowledged spirituality in less direct ways helped to establish important conceptual
foundations. For instance, Elfreda Chatman recognized that the custodial workers and retired women in her studies often read their bibles, but did not offer a deeper analysis as to why the bible remained such a significant document or information source in their social worlds (Chatman, 1987; Chatman, 1999). Brenda Dervin’s Sense-Making framework has also been adopted in contemporary studies of information behaviour among clergy and lay religious leaders that attend to information seeking as a means of bridging gaps in religious and spiritual knowledge (Dervin, 2005; Michels, 2014; Roland, 2007; Wicks, 1997).

One of the earliest studies to explicitly investigate the intersection of information and spirituality was Jarkko Kari’s doctoral dissertation on the information needs and seeking activities of paranormalists (i.e., people interested in supernatural phenomena) in Finland (Kari, 2001). Using Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology as a framework for interviews with 16 paranormalists, Kari found that most information sources perceived as paranormal by study participants were consulted to help address normal matters (Kari, 2001). Furthermore, Kari’s findings indicated that supernatural information experiences do not subscribe to rigid, linear timelines (Kari, 2001). Finally, Kari observed that participants understood situations of information seeking to involve paranormal phenomena, as information could be sought and obtained through what they understood to be “supernatural modes of communication” (Kari, 2001, p. 3). As Kari later pointed out, investigating the role of information in spiritual life can help to generate new knowledge about how people access information (e.g., through speech, ritual, and prayer, in addition to more widely acknowledged sources such as print and online media and personal communication) (Kari, 2007).

Since Kari’s empirical research was conducted, research on information behaviour and practice in spiritual contexts has remained dominated by a focus on the information seeking activities of Christian church leaders. Extending Daniel Roland’s doctoral dissertation – which was also framed by Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology – Daniel Roland and Don Wicks conducted a case study on information seeking by Lutheran clergy members in their Sunday sermon preparation. Roland and Wicks used a “conversational” approach that incorporated participant observation, interviews, and narrative analysis (Roland, 2007; Roland & Wicks, 2009). By applying this approach, the authors drew attention to ways in which a person’s faith affects
his/her information seeking and use behaviour and asserted that the researchers’ insider status as ordained Christian ministers enabled them to understand the detailed theological principles and beliefs described by their informants (Roland & Wicks, 2009). Another case study, on ten Southern Baptist ministers, identified “stopping behaviour” as instances of the termination of an information search process once a person thinks that he/she has gathered sufficient information to complete activities such as sermon preparation, or when a person cannot justify expending any additional time and effort on seeking information (Lambert, 2010). Lambert also found that the ministers who participated in his study preferred informal information sources such as personal contacts when looking for information related to administrative duties, while they tended to prefer formal sources such as biblical commentaries and concordances when seeking sermon-related information (Lambert, 2010).

Using ethnography as a methodological framework, librarian and information scholar David H. Michels explored the ways in which new media affect Baptist church leaders’ information seeking processes, as they develop their own faith and administer corporate decision-making during congregational restructuring (Michels, 2009; Michels, 2012; Michels, 2014). In contrast to earlier arguments about the internet as a threat to religious knowledge and practice, Michels found that access to theologically diverse websites and social media channels, in addition to email and cloud-based document management tools such as Google Docs, enabled church leaders to engage with their congregations more quickly through relevant media (Michels, 2012, pp. 21-24). While recognizing the challenge of verifying prayer as a form of communication, Michels also pointed out that for his participants, prayer is “analogous to people sources” (Michels, 2012, p. 24). Although not directly related to information seeking in religious settings, other information scholars such as John Walsh and Kiersten Latham have considered the role of documents in spiritual experience, by examining Christian icons as material information sources that convey theological narratives through visual representations, and investigating the “numinous experiences” that museum visitors have with museum objects (Walsh, 2012; Latham, 2013; Latham, 2014; Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016). Through such studies, these authors identify the significance of documents in meaning-making and indicate the value of studying the religious and mystical aspects of human-information interactions.
Scholarship that explores the spiritual aspects of information behaviour extends the humanistic approach advanced by earlier literature on affect by taking into consideration a person’s beliefs and information seeking and use patterns that take place in everyday life (e.g. Kari re: paranormalists) and in the workplace (e.g. Lambert re: Baptist ministers, Roland and Wicks re: Lutheran clergy). Existing research on information seeking among Christian clergy has contributed to expanding ideas about information behaviour by pointing to stopping behaviour (Lambert, 2010), collaborative information behaviour among congregations undergoing transition (Michels, 2014), and sermon preparation as a form of sense-making (Roland, 2007). However, it remains largely limited to one religious tradition – in particular, one which predominates in the regions where it has been studied (namely, Canada and the U.S.). Studying the context of conversion to Islam in a major metropolitan area in North America broadens this line of scholarship further, by trying to understand some of the patterns of information practice that take place in the process of embracing a religion that remains marginalized from historically dominant institutions (as evidenced by statutory holidays, academic calendars, the presence of separate Catholic school boards, etc.).

4 Religious conversion
As scholars of conversion have noted, performances are part of an ongoing trajectory of aspiring to become a member of a religious community. Widely cited psychologist of religion Lewis Rambo describes conversion as a fundamental reorientation of a person’s spirituality and overall lifestyle (Rambo, 1993). While recognizing conversion experiences as diverse and subjective, Rambo proposes a holistic and inclusive model that accounts for the convergence of linguistic and social factors that foster religious transitions (Rambo, 1993, pp. 34–8). Specifically, Rambo’s model outlines a typology of religious changes – including “institutional transition, affiliation, intensification, and apostasy and defection” (Rambo, 1993, p. 39) – and seven stages that characterize conversion experiences – namely, context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo, 1993). While Rambo’s holistic model offers a useful foundation for studying conversion, a more explicit investigation into information seeking practices in the context of religious conversion is needed to expand Rambo’s ideas. A better understanding of information practice is especially relevant at a time when so much of our daily lives are centered around filtering through news and social media, managing data and documents.
at home and in the workplace, communicating through various online channels, and managing extensive personal collections of photographs, videos, and other media. Studying the relationship between religious experiences such as conversion and information seeking, evaluation and sharing practices can also contribute to deeper insights into the qualities of information practices that are not necessarily task-based, goal-oriented, or driven by a specific purpose or objective, and which take place in contexts of transition and change. For instance, there are several examples in the following findings chapters of participants’ encounters with serendipitous information that they did not actively seek out or find through targeted search strategies. The conversion process itself often happens gradually without a particular end goal in mind. Information practices in this context reflect this gradual, continuous process in that they are tied to believers’ ongoing conversion experiences rather than tactical steps to answer a single question, solve an immediate problem, or address a distinct information need.

In response to earlier theories of conversion, which tended to be biased towards conceptualizing conversion as an experience that occurs among adolescents who have encountered a crisis (e.g., Lofland & Stark, 1965), anthropologist Henri Gooren developed a framework based on the idea of a “conversion career” (Gooren, 2010). Originally coined by sociologist James T. Richardson to describe the dynamic experiences of people who encountered “multiple-event conversions” when exploring alternative religious options, the “conversion career” consisted of three key categories: “prior socialization, contemporary experiences and circumstances, and the opportunity structure available for problem definition and resolution” (Richardson & Stewart, 1978). Building upon these categories, Gooren proposed a typology of religious participation with five levels of activity: preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation (Gooren, 2010, pp. 48–50). Gooren argues that a person experiencing conversion may engage in these levels of religious activity throughout his/her life, and that religious changes are dynamic and continuous (Gooren, 2010, pp. 50–1). Like Rambo, Gooren suggests that levels of religious activity among individuals are influenced by social, institutional, cultural, political, personality, and contingency factors (Gooren, 2010, pp. 51–2).

Other anthropologists of religion, such as Simon Coleman, have observed the gradual and fluid nature of conversion. In contrast with earlier descriptions of conversion as an abrupt, dramatic
event that results from a crisis or divine revelation (Jacobs, 2012; James, 1902), Coleman presents the idea of “continuous conversion” as an “ideological category and a set of ritualized practices” (Coleman, 2003, p. 18). In his analysis of a Swedish charismatic Protestant group’s rhetoric and proselytizing activities, Coleman argues that it is through these activities that believers continuously maintain their faith, even if they are intended to convert others (Coleman, 2003, pp. 16–18). From this perspective, conversion is not only temporally continuous for neophytes; it also represents a continuity with proselytization, and between one’s previously held values and those that develop with religious change. This notion that religious change is an ongoing social and ideological process in which ambiguous boundaries between affiliations result in blurred identities is a useful theoretical insight to inform research on how information mediates Muslim converts’ conversion experiences.

5 Conversion to Islam in North America and Europe

Since the 1990s, sociologists and anthropologists of religion have extended the study of religious conversion beyond Christianity and new religious movements (NRMs) by beginning to address the paucity of scholarship on conversion to Islam (Poston, 1992; Zebiri, 2007). Larry Poston’s doctoral research on Islamic da’wah in the United States and Europe, which gathered data through questionnaires and published accounts by American and European converts to Islam, found that conversion to Islam was the result of a gradual seeking process involving thoughtful evaluation of religious options before making the decision to become Muslim (Poston, 1992, pp. 169-171). As opposed to earlier theories that conceptualized conversion as a sudden event precipitated by brainwashing, Poston’s study highlights the importance of activities such as reading Islamic literature, having conversations with Muslims, travelling to predominantly Muslim countries, and making pilgrimages to Muslim sites, for Americans and Europeans who convert to Islam (Poston, 1992, p. 170).

The kind of continuous, intellectual search that was integral to the conversion experiences that Poston examined is also evident in other studies of Muslim converts. For example, Ali Köse’s

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10 Translated from the Arabic verb, “to invite” or “to summon,” da’wah is widely interpreted by Muslims as the practice of evangelizing about Islam as a way of inviting people to submit to faith in Allah (Poston, 1992, pp. 3-4).
research on the pre-conversion, conversion, and post-conversion experiences of native British converts to Islam in the United Kingdom (UK) acknowledges the gradual nature of conversion and the continuity that many Muslim converts experience between their previous faith traditions and Islam (Köse, 1994). Köse found that once the converts who participated in his study had formally accepted Islam by pronouncing the *shahadah*, they made an ongoing transition to become Muslims by learning how to pray in Arabic, participating in Islamic practices, and ultimately, adopting a new way of life (Köse, 1999). Other studies of Muslim converts in the UK have investigated how converts to Islam combine selective values from European society with Muslim identities to produce “a new European or British Islam” (Zebiri, 2007, p. 2), and negotiate ways of practicing Islam in order to be both faithful and accepted as “authentic” by peer Muslims (Moosavi, 2012, p. 109). Although not explicitly described as information practices, such studies illuminate the important role that reading habits, online resources, and personal sources of Islamic guidance and knowledge play in finding information to learn more about Islam (for further examples, see van Nieuwkerk, 2008).

In Canada, few studies have investigated Muslim conversion; however, Emily Hemlow’s master’s thesis on the conversion narratives shared by five female North American converts to Islam living in the Toronto area offers an important precedent for further research on Muslim converts in the GTA (Hemlow, 2011). Hemlow’s study explores the pressures that her participants felt to perform particular kinds of conversion stories, yet her ethnography also draws attention to the processes of contemplation, learning, and analysis that were an important part of her participants’ conversion experiences (Hemlow, 2011). Therefore, while not identifying information practice as the central theoretical concept or phenomenon in their research, existing empirical literature on Muslim conversion in North America and Europe alludes to the significance of information sources and activities in converts’ transitions to Islam, and offers a foundation upon which my research can be built. Studies of conversion to Islam in North America and Europe tend to emphasize intellectual (over mystical or emotional) aspects of this phenomenon, such as reading academic articles and books, attending lectures and conferences, and taking courses (e.g., Mansson McGinty, 2007; van Nieuwkerk, 2008). However, few studies

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11 Defined by Köse as the “declaration of faith,” which includes accepting “the oneness of God, and the Prophet Muhammad as His last messenger” (Köse, 1994, p. 198).
explicitly consider why people initially begin to examine scholarly sources over others (e.g. mainstream news articles about Islam, popular Muslim magazines and websites, pamphlets distributed at public da‘wah stands or outlets). Thus, it is unclear whether the emphasis on an academic initiation to learning what it means to be Muslim can be explained by researchers’ recruitment techniques (e.g. drawing primarily from university students and young professionals who have a post-secondary education), by the possibility that participants attempted to rationalize their decision to embrace a stigmatized religion by re-connecting with the intellectual legacy of Islam’s historical contributions, or due to some other reason.

6 Chapter summary

Existing literature on everyday life information seeking, information behaviour and practice in spiritual contexts, and religious conversion provides the groundwork for studying the information practices of Muslim converts in the GTA. However, literature on everyday life information seeking tends to explore secular settings (particularly ones characterized by problems and difficulty), models based on Christian traditions dominate the theoretical literature on conversion, and the empirical literature on conversion to Islam mainly remains limited to studies of women and radicalized converts. Although anthropologists such as Gooren acknowledge that individual conversion processes are socially and culturally constructed, their frameworks do not explicitly address the role of information practice in conversion experiences. This omission raises questions about possible correspondences between particular information activities (e.g., active information seeking, browsing, and serendipitous information encounters) and levels of religious participation that have been articulated in existing conversion theories. Recent studies of religious and spiritual information behaviour offer a promising point of departure for my research, yet this emerging body of work focuses primarily on Christian religious leaders. By building upon social science scholarship on conversion and extending information scholarship to a previously marginalized religious context, my research will illuminate interdisciplinary connections and draw attention to religious information seeking, evaluation, and sharing among laypeople who experience transitions into a new faith tradition – especially one that is fraught with negative media and policy discourses.
Chapter 3
Conceptual Framework

1 Information practice and “higher things in life”
Since my research is informed by interpretive ethnography, I developed my conceptual framework over the course of data collection and analysis, starting with a flexible scaffolding of ideas related to information practice and “higher things in life” (Kari & Hartel, 2007). This scaffolding acted as a lens through which I viewed phenomena that I encountered at field sites and perspectives that participants shared with me in interviews, and helped to structure the narrative presented in the following chapters.

Recognizing the ongoing debates within Information Studies over the merits of the concepts of information practice versus information behaviour, I situate my work in line with the theoretical lens of “information practice” as an alternative to traditionally cognitive approaches to information science. Behavioural approaches place individual information needs and seeking activities at the forefront, and tend to neglect macro forces such as the social, cultural, and political contexts in which individuals are situated (Bates, 2010). Central to information practice is French social theorist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of habitus – the continuous, habitual, detailed actions and strategies that people enact in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977). These actions and strategies are developed and learned by being members in social and cultural groups (Bourdieu, 1977; Savolainen, 2007; Talja, 2010). By interpreting habitus for research on information seeking and use, proponents of information practice argue that the ways in which people manage information are similarly constructed in specific sociocultural settings, rather than developed merely through individual cognitive processes when interacting with information sources, systems, and interfaces (Savolainen, 2007; Talja, 2010).

Acknowledging the scholarly contributions of Reijo Savolainen and others who have advocated for using information practice as a central idea in research on information seeking and use, my research strives to further develop existing conceptualizations of information practice. I work towards extending a holistic interpretation of information practice. I strive to do this by drawing from literature on information experience and literacy that uses a sociocultural analytic
perspective (Carlsson et al., 2013; Francke et al., 2011), referring to research that highlights information practices as “signs of commitment” to serious leisure pursuits (Harviainen, 2014), and addressing some of the critiques that have been presented against the concept. For example, Savolainen’s idea of information practice has been critiqued for its narrow focus on individuals’ goal-oriented information seeking practices within physical spaces; its insufficient attention to embodied, affective, and collaborative dimensions of information phenomena; and its methodological elusiveness (Davenport, 2009; Head & Eisenberg, 2011; McKenzie, 2010; Smith, 2012). Social scientists in other disciplines have noted that knowledge production is an embodied process in that “the information we gather often involves our physical being, not simply our minds and imaginations” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 154). By drawing upon my own insights and observations, I intend to expand existing conceptualizations of information practice and move away from thinking about it as purely individualized and detached from the spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of human life.

Sociocultural approaches to information literacy focus on exploring how people learn to communicate through linguistic tools and cultural artifacts within specific social and cultural practices – for example, in universities and non-academic workplaces. This analytic perspective acknowledges that there are different information cultures with norms, values, conditions, and activities specific to various contexts of learning and information use (Hanell, 2014; Limberg et al., 2012; Sundin & Johannisson, 2005). By framing my research with a sociocultural perspective, I work to articulate how Muslim converts’ personal religious experiences are shaped by the communities in which they participate and the discursive resources they mobilize. Given that individual experiences of religious conversion often involve community participation (van Nieuwkerk, 2008), information practice lends itself more appropriately than information behaviour to studying this phenomenon. As an explanatory lens through which I interpreted what I found in my research, information practice helps to prioritize certain concerns – including how information seeking, evaluation, and sharing support learning processes among novices who strive to participate in communities or social worlds (Takhteyev, 2012, pp. 25–8; Wenger, 1998) with their own recognizable set of values, vocabularies, standards, and histories; the ways in which social groups rely on and constrain individual action in order to develop (Takhteyev,
212, p. 30); and how information resources can serve as sources of individual knowledge and inspiration for social engagement (Takhteyev, 2012, p. 211).

Kari and Hartel (2007) observe that attention to information phenomena present in the pleasurable and profound aspects of human life can allow scholars to expand Information Studies beyond its conventional problem orientation towards a more complete picture of information experience. My research is also guided by the idea that conversion to Islam may involve inspirational and aspirational information practices, rather than efforts to merely access information to cope with immediate personal crises. Moreover, Kari and Hartel’s (2007) ideas about “higher things in life” offer a foundation to help interpret my observations and participants’ accounts by drawing attention to information practices that are part of everyday life, but which are also closely intertwined with participants’ beliefs and their relationships with the divine and with peer religious adherents. Kari and Hartel (2007) offered conceptual motivation to acknowledge that spiritual contexts transcend concerns with information seeking and use as strategies to solve problems and achieve specific goals, which have tended to be the focus of studies on settings such as workplaces, libraries, and schools. By invoking the concept of information practice, I am concerned with the question of how Muslim converts look for, assess, and express information throughout their conversion experiences. Building on the conceptual framework of information practice and “higher things in life,” the following sensitizing concepts helped guide me to issues to pursue. These concepts also illuminate the concerns reflected in my research questions, while leaving space to explore the lived experiences of local Muslim converts.

2 Religious identity
Following Olof Sundin and Jenny Johannisson, the notion of identity connects individuals with the communities in which they participate (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005). For the purposes of my research, I define religious identity as the distinguishable style or expression of a person’s religious affiliation and spiritual values, which can be recognized by others through a person’s actions, rhetorical practices, and preferences, and through the ways in which others relate and respond to them – including social exclusion, advice about religious customs, and proselytization
efforts (Bourque, 2006; Lemke, 2010; Mulderig, 2011; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012; Stromberg, 1993). My research draws on literature about religious identity from the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion to further investigate this concept and explore its relationship to information practice. In particular, my research is guided by Meena Sharify-Funk’s and Munira Kassam Haddad’s discussion of multi-dimensional Islamic identity negotiation, which involves interacting layers of text, local context, and intergroup context (Sharify-Funk & Haddad, 2012). This process of identity negotiation is inherently tied to issues of cognitive authority and credibility assessment that continue to be central to studies of information practice and information literacy (Lloyd, 2009, pp. 403, 406). Furthermore, the idea of multi-dimensional and continuously negotiated religious identity reflects examinations of how identities become destabilized in the context of globalization, as geographic and cultural boundaries become blurred through migration and networked communication (Campbell, 2012; Coleman & Collins, 2004; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Flanagan, 2004; Helland, 2005; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). As the following chapters will address, these blurred boundaries are especially salient for Muslim converts in the GTA, who connect online with peer believers who are physically located in different places to learn, share resources, and find moral support as adherents of a growing yet stigmatized religion. At the same time, they negotiate how to present themselves in their daily lives as they interact with other GTA residents – friends, coworkers, neighbours, commuters, teachers, healthcare providers, etc. – from an array of cultures. The potentially destabilizing effects of globalization are further complicated for research participants who self-identified as im/migrants to the GTA from places where Islam is not the dominant religion. For these individuals, their familiarity with Islam was limited before their teachers or friends introduced them to this religion through books and conversation, often after making the move to the GTA.

The literature on religious identity as performances produced in relation to authorized legitimators suggests that conversion narratives should not be taken for granted, but should be understood as discursive constructions that reflect an implicit *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990). In her study of piety among women involved in an Islamic revivalist movement in Cairo, anthropologist Saba Mahmood found that female mosque participants repeatedly performed specific actions such as dietary restrictions, prayer, and dialogue in an effort to align their “volition, desires, emotions, and bodily gestures” to meet certain standards of devout
behaviour (Mahmood, 2012, p. 135). Drawing upon Judith Butler’s theories of embodied performativity, Mahmood suggests that Muslim women construct their identities through various “bodily practices,” such as clothing and speech, although they may share “the same cultural and historical space” with others (Butler, 1993; Butler, 1997a; Butler, 1997b; Mahmood, 2004, pp. 120-121, pp. 162-167). Others have similarly noted the changes in names, clothing, and customs that Muslim converts adopt to be recognized as peers in their religious communities (Borbieva, 2012; Bourque, 2006; Mulderig, 2011; Rogozen-Soltar, 2012; Zebiri, 2007). By conceptualizing clothing choices, spoken word, and other bodily practices observed and described by participants as resources upon which Muslim converts draw and with which their bodies engage to develop and present their religious identities, I contribute to extending scholarly knowledge about the embodied and material aspects of information practice. By revisiting existing theoretical frameworks of conversion, my research aims to bring greater attention to the role of knowledge and information sources in experiences of converting to Islam. Using the concepts of religious identity and information experience allowed me to explore how Muslim converts’ information seeking, evaluation, and sharing practices and processes of learning inform who they are.

3 Spiritual literacy and knowledge construction
Communication scholars and anthropologists and sociologists of religion have theorized about the role of new media in catalyzing shifts in modes of knowledge production and control, albeit with greater attention to how religious authority is assessed in a contemporary society characterized by online communication, geographic dispersal and diasporic communities (Anderson, 2010; Campbell, 2012; Cheong et al., 2011; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; El-Nawawy, 2009; Hefner, 2010; Kreinath, 2012). In his ethnographic research on the role of sermon tapes in shaping and reviving Islamic moral principles in Cairo, anthropologist Charles Hirschkind suggests that rather than mere media, cassette sermons enable a complex affective and sensory environment in which Muslim listeners envision and maintain ethical frameworks that guide them in living lives that align with “God’s will” (Hirschkind, 2006). In exploring the information practices of Muslim converts, this attention to the relationship between affect and media engagement will be imperative.
Working outside of Communication and Information Studies and the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion, literacy and rhetoric scholar Vicki Tolar Burton’s exploration of “spiritual literacy” reflects similar concerns about how spiritual knowledge is pursued and communicated. In her research on the rhetorical practices involved in John Wesley’s life and early Methodism in 18th century Britain, Tolar Burton extends language and literacy scholars David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s ideas about “literacy practices” – the normative, socioculturally situated ways in which people produce and distribute written language to construct an understanding of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) – to understand how personal spirituality develops (Tolar Burton, 2008). Throughout her book, Tolar Burton highlights examples of activities from Wesley’s life such as meditating; writing journals, letters and poetry; reading and annotating religious texts; composing prayers and hymns; relating musical lyrics to one’s own life; participating in communal worship, family devotion, and spiritual conversation; sharing and listening to testimonies; presenting sermons and apologetics; and engaging with theological and doctrinal documents (Tolar Burton, 2008, pp. 64, 84–5, 246–7). In so doing, she articulates her notion of “spiritual literacy” as the ongoing, routine reading and writing practices that happen in private, in the presence of other believers, and at a broader level of religious institutions (Tolar Burton, 2008). Although the terms may apply to different contexts, the parallels between what information scholars refer to as information literacy and what Tolar Burton calls spiritual literacy are striking. For studies situated at the intersection of information and religion, Tolar Burton’s concept of spiritual literacy offers a promising avenue to explore in other research settings, including my own research, by focusing on how people learn their religion.

Indeed, studies that have addressed issues such as the role of media and rhetorical practices in shaping spirituality and religious authority provide the conceptual foundation to examine information practices as critical components of learning processes (i.e., how people come to know what they know). Moreover, they emphasize the influence of community members in constructing the ways in which people seek religious knowledge, while acknowledging the practices individuals develop and enact to navigate their own circumstances. Finally, they describe activities related to learning and communication as affective, embodied, and social, rather than merely cognitive. These insights connect to discussions in the anthropology of Islam.
about different ways in which Muslims pursue spiritual knowledge – including devotion, practice, and scholarship (Werbner, 2006) – and to the emerging body of scholarship on information and religion, which has conceptualized prayer, sermons, and spiritual journal-keeping as information behaviours and practices (Kari, 2009; Michels, 2011; Roland, 2012; Siracky, 2013).

4 Information literacy and experience

Contemporary scholarship on information literacy offers additional ideas to explore in my research. As Michael Buckland notes, information can be manifested not only as a form or object (Buckland, 1991), but it also deals with processes of knowing and learning, and knowledge (i.e. beliefs) is incrementally constructed through our engagement with cultural contexts (Buckland, 2012, p. 6). Scholars who attend to information literacy highlight the sensory and discursive knowledge learned in professional and academic communities, and examine how people look for and evaluate the credibility of resources and share information when engaged in learning or when undergoing transitions (Limberg et al., 2012; Lloyd, 2007; Rieh et al., 2016; Sundin & Johannison, 2005). In her study of firefighters, Annemaree Lloyd found that professional identities were formed through the textual, physical, and social practices of a particular discursive community (Lloyd, 2007). Lloyd’s research on ambulance officers similarly describes the relationship between professional identity formation and information literacy (Lloyd, 2009). Lloyd illustrates that information literacy is “more than just an experience with text or skills-based literacy. It is viewed as socio-cultural practice which is shaped by discourse” (Lloyd, 2009, p. 396). Moreover, Lloyd suggests that information literacy is tightly intertwined with “processes such as mediation and negotiation” (Lloyd, 2009, p. 397), which occur when novices transition into new professional roles and progress in their careers – processes which are similarly associated with religious identity construction (Sharify-Funk & Haddad, 2012).

Lloyd’s work on “information landscapes” (Lloyd, 2006; Lloyd, 2014; Lloyd et al., 2013) particularly relates to Chapter Six on Navigation, as it points to how trusted mediators (including

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12 Devotional, practical, and scholarly means of pursuing spiritual knowledge have been similarly noted in studies of other religious groups, including Evangelical Protestantism (e.g. Galonnier & de los Rios, 2016).
Librarians and community service providers can help new people navigate networks and “complex ecologies” (Lloyd, 2006) of multimodal (i.e. visual, written, and social) resources, and how access to these networks is essential to social inclusion. As Lloyd and her colleagues point out, social exclusion can be considered as:

“An information disjuncture, where individuals new to the information landscapes of a new society – and therefore the established methods of information production, reproduction, circulation and modes of access— find that their previous information practices may no longer be adequate or appropriate in their new settings” (Lloyd et al., 2013, p. 122).

While Lloyd’s work focuses on workplace information literacy among firefighters and the re/settlement experiences of refugees and migrants in Australia, the theme of information landscapes pertains to other situations in which people are learning about and becoming members of new communities – including conversion to Islam in the GTA.

A phenomenographic study of Uniting Church in Australia members highlighted “informed learning” as a strategy used by church leaders and laypeople to develop their faith and manage administrative responsibilities (Gunton et al., 2012). This study shifted the traditional focus of information literacy away from academic learning environments, toward the varied information experiences that take place through relationships “between people and aspects of the world” (Gunton et al., 2012, p. 120) in everyday life – including in faith communities. Information experience is defined as an inclusive and holistic approach to research on information seeking and use that explores – often through the aforementioned methodology of phenomenography – the interrelationships between people and their environments, and the non-dualistic connections among bodily, cognitive, and social aspects of human engagement with information (Yates et al., 2012, pp. 96–9). Like Lyndelle Gunton and her co-authors, and continuing in the tradition set forth by William James (1902), my emphasis in this study is on the experience of religion, rather than philosophical or theological discussions about religion. In my research, I draw on the related notions of information literacy and information experience to interpret participants’ descriptions of, for example, situations when they learned how to pray, evaluated the relevance and credibility of sources, and navigated their social, religious, and geographic environments to

13 For a more detailed discussion of James’s work, refer to the BBC In Our Time podcast hosted by Melvyn Bragg: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00s9fw#in=collection:p01f0vzr
find communities where they felt welcomed. In particular, I remain mindful of Lloyd’s conceptualization of information literacy as a discursively constructed practice that makes a direct impact on how people learn to represent themselves as members of specific sociocultural communities.

5 Chapter summary
This chapter outlined the sensitizing concepts that make up the framework for this study. Specifically, it described existing literature on information practice and “higher things in life,” religious identity, spiritual literacy and knowledge construction, and information literacy and experience. It also articulated the value of these concepts for guiding research on the information practices of Muslim converts in the GTA, and how these practices inform their understanding of their religion and their sense of self. While scholarly work on information practice emphasizes the everyday actions and strategies that people enact to seek and manage information, ideas about religious identity and spiritual literacy guide my attention towards the processes of cultivating spirituality, negotiating how to express religious affiliation, and how others may respond to this expression. Finally, studies of information literacy and experience inspire a focus on the ways in which sensory and discursive knowledge develop in particular communities. Together, these concepts form the conceptual foundation on which this study’s findings and theoretical connections are built.
Chapter 4
Methodology

“Stories, then, can be a means to discover something completely new about the world. The value of stories, however, lies not just in their telling, but in their retelling”
(Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 8).

1 Interpretive Ethnography

My research is informed by interpretive ethnography, which aims to translate personal experiences “into textual form” (Clifford, 1983). The key goal of using ethnography as a methodology is to develop rich, detailed descriptions about participants’ conversion experiences and connected information practices, based on my extended immersion in the various sites and communities they occupy – including mosques, convert support and discussion groups, religious conventions, and homes – and documenting the actions and practices that I observed (Bernard, 2011). By applying interpretive ethnography, I offer a detailed analysis of the ways in which research participants seek, evaluate, and share information that is significant to their conversion experiences, from their “emic” perspectives (Fidel, 2012, p. 51). As Theresa Anderson and Ina Fourie point out, while qualitative methods that rely solely on interviews draw limited data, “ethnography captures more of an ongoing process, by involving biographies in analysis” (Anderson & Fourie, 2014). My use of interpretive ethnography in this project is intended to acknowledge the personal and subjective perspectives of participants about what conversion to Islam is for them, and what socially and culturally constructed processes of seeking, evaluating, and sharing information involve in relation to their conversion experiences.

Using ethnography as a methodological framework for my study means that I am less concerned about obtaining “true” accounts in a positivist sense, than I am with understanding participants’ perceptions and points of view – in other words, what is “truthful” to them (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006). Rather than assessing ethnography on the basis of evaluation criteria applied to research in a positivist paradigm that strives to study statistically representative samples to develop universal and generalizable theories, ethnographic research should be evaluated based
on its ability to present plausible, credible, and relevant findings about participants’ experiences and the cultural contexts in which they are situated (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 117; Hammersley, 1990, pp. 57–62). In response to criticisms of ethnography as a methodology that develops theories based on stories that rely on participants’ imperfect memories which have questionable credibility or may be outright false, I argue that the value of stories and observed actions stems from their capacity to reveal broader concerns regarding information phenomena in particular contexts of human life. Rather than focusing on obtaining generalizable results, my research strives to explore experiences that can provide insights about information practice, which are relevant to other contexts (religious and secular) and may offer the basis for future research that uses other qualitative and quantitative methods with larger samples.

2 Ethical Considerations

Depending on participants’ socioeconomic statuses and educational backgrounds, there was a possibility of a perceived power differential between participants and I (as a non-Muslim researcher). I worked diligently to acknowledge and diminish this power differential as much as possible by remaining aware of my multiple roles other than as a researcher, treating participants with respect, and verbally maintaining their consent to participate throughout the data collection process. Given the political climate in light of terrorist activities that have been linked to Islamic radicalized groups, there was a concern that some prospective participants may have been worried about undercover agents infiltrating Muslim communities and organizations. However, these concerns were addressed by articulating my study’s purpose and informed consent letter in clear, accessible language and assuring prospective participants that participation in my project was completely voluntary, and that they had the option to withdraw at any time. The informed consent letters for individual participants and organizations also explained that all data collected as part of my study would be treated confidentially, and will be retained securely in locked filing cabinets and a password-protected computer and encrypted USB for an indefinite length of time, to allow for the completion of my dissertation and subsequent presentations and publications. Documentation about my study also maintains a clear connection with the University of Toronto through the inclusion of Faculty of Information letterhead and my supervisor’s name and contact
information, to reassure participants that I am a graduate student researcher and am not working for a security agency or police operative.

3 Data Collection

Data collection methods are informed by interpretive ethnography (outlined above). I combined semi-structured narrative interviews and participant observation with a graphic elicitation technique known as “timelining” (Sheridan et al., 2011) to document participants’ discursive practices and information activities. In addition to providing conceptual motivation for this study, Kari and Hartel (2007) set a methodological precedent for studying spiritual contexts holistically. Specifically, this paper invited information scholars to examine not only information systems and library service provision, but content genres, materials, aesthetics, personal experiences, searches for meaning, and the social and cultural landscapes in which research participants are situated (Kari & Hartel, 2007). Furthermore, the authors argued that because few precedents of studying “higher things in life” exist in information scholarship, research on information in spiritual contexts would benefit from drawing on theories and methods from other disciplines – including ethnography (Kari & Hartel, 2007).

3.1 Research access and working as an outsider

Drawing on ideas about multi-sited ethnography (outlined in the next chapter), I started to identify participants by circulating a Call for Participants flyer via email through my social and professional networks, and to community “gatekeepers” (Gilliat-Ray et al., 2013) such as Muslim chaplains, imams, and program directors at local Muslim organizations that offer religious education courses, social events, and spiritual care and support for Muslim converts. Given the de-institutionalized, “un-mosqued” nature of many Muslim converts’ experiences (Haddad, 2011), I combined multiple recruitment strategies including advertisements about my study in email newsletters of Muslim Students’ Associations, chaplaincies, multi-faith centres, mosques, and convert care centres; announcements to social media platforms maintained by these groups and organizations; introductory email messages to organizations’ leaders and key administrators and my networks; and conversations with prospective participants at public
events. Although I was the sole researcher involved in recruiting participants, several participants shared my flyer with additional prospective participants in their networks. Such connections through friends, colleagues, and acquaintances offered a less formal approach and opened conversations in a more familiar and trusted manner.

My introductory email to leaders and key administrators of local organizations provided general information about my study and requested assistance in circulating the flyer among community members and organization leaders’ social networks. I also included an informed consent letter, which asked for administrative consent to allow me to enter organizations to conduct participant observation. I attended religious education classes, discussion groups for new Muslims, an iftar, and two conventions. At smaller gatherings that were hosted by one or two individuals, I asked the event organizer to announce in advance my intention to attend. I told them that if community members expressed a preference for me to refrain from attending, I would honour such requests. For larger events such as the annual Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention, it was not feasible to provide advanced notice of my intention to attend as a participant observer to every organizer and attendee. Still, at all events (including the conventions), I introduced myself as a graduate student researcher and brought copies of my flyer and business cards, which included my name and contact information, in case people I met wanted more details or wished to follow up about my research.

Through respondents to the flyer and chain-referral via the participants I met, I identified 13 participants who self-identified as Muslim converts. Between June 2014 and October 2015, I conducted initial interviews with all participants and held follow-up interviews with 12 participants. (One participant withdrew from the project after our initial interview, though she expressed an interest in reading the findings.) I also met with two participants’ spouses for short, semi-structured interviews. Rather than attempting to identify a large sample that is generalizable or statistically representative of the diverse Muslim population in Canada or the GTA, my

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14 Despite the widespread “un-mosqued” trend across North America, regular mosque attendance (i.e. at least once per week) has reportedly increased from 41% in 2006 to 48% in 2016 among Muslims in Canada (Environics, 2016).

15 Evening meal to break daily fast with family and community members during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.
study’s relatively small sample of 15 participants offers a deeper understanding of the variety of Muslim converts’ information practices, while it also generated a manageable amount of data for my thesis research and highlights issues to be investigated in future research.

As a non-Muslim researcher, the connections I made through local organizations helped to identify participants who would be difficult to otherwise contact, while demonstrating respect for worship space and concerns about outside researchers’ motives for studying Muslim communities (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012). By accessing sites in both downtown Toronto and in the neighbouring region, I attempted to identify participants with a variety of ages, gender identities, education levels, occupations, cultural backgrounds, and religious outlooks. That said, because recruitment happened through snowball sampling and organizations that catered primarily to Muslim youth and/or university and college students, many of the participants and I shared mutual acquaintances, friends, and academic interests.

Over the course of informal conversations, interviews, participant observation, and analysis, I applied appropriate safeguards to secure personal data (Government of Canada, 2012). I used pseudonyms created with participants to protect the privacy and confidentiality of identifiable personal and place names – including any affiliated organizations and institutions, and cities where participants lived before settling in the GTA. To ensure that participants did not compromise the anonymity of others in their social networks, I cautioned participants to refrain from choosing a pseudonym that could be potentially linked to their immediate communities.

My status as an outsider meant that I participated insofar as I could without being deceitful. When attending religious education classes, conventions, and convert discussion group meetings, I left the room for prayer times and refrained from reciting prayers and supplications if the group was invited to do so. When these expressions of belief occurred in my presence, I quietly and respectfully listened. Rather than being a disadvantage for conducting research, my outsider status allowed for opportunities to ask about or seek clarification on issues and terminology that were unfamiliar to me. This provided a chance for participants to share their knowledge and demonstrate expertise on certain subjects (which could be perceived as a form of continuous
conversion and *da’wah*).\(^{16}\) As an outsider, I was also able to empathize with feelings of isolation, self-consciousness, and lack of awareness about cultural norms and where to start looking to navigate the landscape of Muslim communities in the GTA. Throughout fieldwork, analysis, and writing, I acknowledged that I will never truly understand what it is like to convert to Islam or to be Muslim in the GTA (and beyond); rather, my study is a way of seeking to understand. I also recognize that I am not speaking on behalf of all Muslim converts or all Muslims in the GTA, nor do I attempt to fully represent those who participated. This research is an interpretive act. While I deeply respect the women and men who spoke with me at events and in interviews, my writing, inevitably, does not capture the fullness of their experiences. My recruitment efforts and the time constraints of the project meant that many voices are absent from this research. (I return to this concern in the Conclusion, and note it as both an inherent limitation of my exploratory study and an opportunity for future research – including work that takes critical theory, participatory action, and activist stances.) As mentioned by Shazlin Rahman, Communications Coordinator at the Inspirit Foundation, in discussing the Survey of Muslims in Canada (see video interview ~6:50 at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNXVhxDgyQw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNXVhxDgyQw)), while there is always a power dynamic between those being studied and those who are studying – or, the “minority and majority” – it is important for those who may hold stereotypical opinions about Muslims to see another point of view, including perspectives that are based on opinion polls and academic and social research.

### 3.2 Interviews

“The essence of qualitative research is that reality is a picture created by the perceptions of individuals experiencing a similar phenomenon or something they have in common… The more perceptions and variations we are able to identify, the wider and deeper the picture becomes… combining and integrating both versions of the reality… means for adding trustworthiness to the study”


Narrative interviews, with their aim of reconstructing social events from participants’ perspectives (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000), are well-aligned with interpretive ethnography. Narrative interviewing has also been identified as an appropriate data collection method for

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\(^{16}\) Defined in Chapter Two. See also Glossary.
studying everyday life information seeking and use (Bates, 2004). The interviews in my study took place in quiet spaces that were comfortable and accessible for participants. These included cafés, meeting rooms at local libraries, and in participants’ homes. I used a digital audio recorder to record interviews, unless participants indicated that they wished to refrain from doing so. In such cases, I took more detailed handwritten notes to document key discussion points and phrases communicated over the course of the interview. The following table outlines the dates and durations of initial and follow-up interviews:

**Table 1. Interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interview 1 Date</th>
<th>Interview 1 Duration</th>
<th>Interview 2 Date</th>
<th>Interview 2 Duration</th>
<th>Time between interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aisha</td>
<td>June 19, 2014</td>
<td>Part of pilot study, time unrecorded</td>
<td>September 23, 2014</td>
<td>1:51:10.2</td>
<td>96 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>August 15, 2014</td>
<td>Part of pilot study, time unrecorded</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Withdrew after initial interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>September 12, 2014</td>
<td>~ 2 hours (part of pilot study, exact time not recorded in transcript)</td>
<td>October 1, 2014</td>
<td>2:11:26.7</td>
<td>19 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivier</td>
<td>September 16, 2014</td>
<td>~ 45 minutes (part of pilot study, exact time not recorded in transcript)</td>
<td>November 20, 2014</td>
<td>1:15:16.1</td>
<td>65 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermione</td>
<td>September 18, 2014</td>
<td>~ 3.5 hours (part of pilot study, exact time not recorded in transcript)</td>
<td>October 30, 2014</td>
<td>1:31:23.9</td>
<td>43 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews occurred in two parts: Initial interviews (on average, one hour and ten minutes, depending on how much each participant wanted to discuss) helped to cultivate participants’ trust and establish the context of their conversion experiences by focusing on critical events in their life histories (Bates, 2004; Everett & Barratt, 2012). Such critical events may be emotionally charged, but may not be necessarily traumatic or upsetting events; rather, they are
understood from participants’ perspectives to be significant moments or situations that have influenced participants’ conversion experiences in some way. When conducting initial interviews, I was guided by anthropologists Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer’s call to study and understand participants’ sensory contexts of what it felt like to experience particular moments, rather than mere facts about what happened (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006).

Instances mentioned by participants about seeking and learning from information sources were elucidated in greater detail through the follow-up interviews, which integrated timeline drawings (pending participants’ consent). With regard to the interview guides, I took an approach similar to anthropologist Sally Campbell Galman’s, following James P. Spradley (1979):

“Open-ended protocols asking questions about how individuals came to their new faith, their process of learning about conversion, and the learning communities of which they were a part both before and after their conversion and how they felt about physically standing out where they had not before” (Galman, 2013, p. 426).

I also followed principles of active interviewing to approach interviews as a dialogue that “acknowledges the respondent’s identity work in interaction during the interview situation as well as through the reconstructive narratives of significant events” (Fernqvist, 2010, p. 1317; see also Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

In addition to interviews with Muslim converts, I purposively recruited select participants’ family members to take part in interviews (approximately 30-60 minutes each). At the end of initial interviews with participants, I asked if they would be willing to introduce me to family members or partners who have witnessed their conversion experience and live in the GTA. Participation was completely voluntary, and I obtained written informed consent before beginning interviews. During interviews with the two participating spouses, I inquired about their religious backgrounds and their perspectives on participants’ conversion experiences and related information practices. These interviews – similar to 360 interviewing or “alter interviewing” that has been used in other studies with social network analysis (e.g. Dubois & Ford, 2015) – are intended to offer a richer understanding of the role of socially constructed information practices in participants’ experiences of embracing Islam, and are informed by the idea that family members and partners often influence a person’s decision to convert to Islam and affect how a person experiences his/her conversion (Haddad, 2006; Mansson McGinty, 2007). I did not request family member interviews if the participant was estranged from their
family, or if their family members were linked with traumatic experiences. (Doing so would have been unethical, as it would have imposed harm.) I also refrained from pursuing family member interviews if the participant’s family lived outside the GTA, as this was outside of the project scope and was logistically impractical. The two interviews that resulted from participant referrals to their spouses added depth and trustworthiness to the perspectives that participants shared. These interviews allowed me to consider the kinds of questions about the relationship between converts and unconverted kin raised by Dannah Dennis and Nathalie Nahas in an American Anthropological Association conference panel: “How does conversion affect the unconverted families of those who do convert? To what extent is the decision to convert constrained by existing social structures or enabled by individual or collective forms of agency?” (Dennis & Nahas, 2016).

3.3 Pilot study: Journals and guided tours

During my pilot study – conducted with five participants from June 2014 through November 2014 – I tested all data collection methods and associated research instruments. At the end of each initial interview, I provided a small, blank notebook with a set of five enclosed questions (see Appendix G) that asked participants to describe a situation when they wanted to learn about Islam or their faith more broadly. This exercise aligns with an ethnographic focus on participants’ perspectives and facilitates a more detailed picture of daily life and critical events (Radcliffe, 2013, pp. 166, 173). The journals were intended to provide participants with an opportunity to express their experiences without the pressure of time constraints and the researcher’s presence that are involved in an interview setting (Bagnoli, 2004). They were also intended to offer a chance for participants to reflect on their comments before participating in follow-up interviews (McKenzie, 2003). As explained in the informed consent letter, participants were given the option to abstain or withdraw from any component of the study, including the journaling exercise. (One pilot study participant abstained from having photographs taken of documents, objects, and spaces used to explain her experience with embracing Islam, and from using excerpts from the journaling exercise in the presentation of research.) During initial interviews, I verbally maintained participants’ consent to proceed with the journaling exercise, reminding them that their participation in the exercise was completely voluntary. Pending their consent, I collected participants’ completed journal entries at the follow-up interviews for review.
and analysis (Janesick, 1999). With the exception of the journaling exercise, initial interviews for my project proceeded as outlined in the original research design and ethics protocol.

Guided tours are a flexible, unscripted data collection method that is intended to facilitate conversational dialogue between researchers and participants (Everett & Barratt, 2012). Situated in spaces that are meaningful to participants, guided tours allow participants to contextualize their responses and stories by showing researchers places that are important to them (Everett & Barratt, 2012). In my original research design outlined in the ethics protocol, I indicated that I would ask participants during follow-up interviews to lead me on a short tour of a space that supports them in their conversion experiences. As part of the guided tours, I intended to ask participants about and photograph (with their permission) salient documents, artifacts, and spaces that pertain to how they develop knowledge related to Islam and Muslim identity (Bahn & Barratt-Pugh, 2013; Collier & Collier, 1986; Hartel & Thomson, 2011; Mizrachi & Bates, 2013; Roland & Wicks, 2009; Spradley, 1979). Pending participants’ consent, I planned to use a digital audio recorder to record conversations that are part of the guided tour, and later transcribe them for analysis. Digital photographs taken during the guided tour would have been treated confidentially, and I had planned to omit photographs of non-consenting persons who may have been present at the site but who had not agreed to participate in my project. I expected that the “un-mosqued” nature of many Muslim converts’ experiences may have had consequences for the guided tour component of my study. My ethics protocol suggested that in instances when participants did not have physical locations that were meaningful to their conversion experiences, I would need to consider possible alternatives to the conventional guided tour approach, such as digital spaces where participants engage in conversation, image and video sharing, and/or being part of a spiritual community (e.g. websites, blogs, social networking platforms, online forums, mobile applications, etc.).

As I prepared for and defended my thesis proposal, I decided to omit the journaling activity and guided tours. Preliminary observations from my pilot study indicated that participants were either uncomfortable with leading a researcher on a guided tour of a space that is meaningful to their conversion experience and spirituality (which is often located in participants’ homes or the homes of close friends), or they did not have an “information space” that was significant to them.
due to a recent relocation or lack of a need to have a space that serves a spiritual purpose. Furthermore, “information space” (Hartel, 2007; Hartel & Thomson, 2011; Mizrachi, 2011) is not the primary theoretical concern of my research. Instead, I am focused on the relationship between religious identity construction and information practice in the context of conversion to Islam. The journaling exercise placed a burden on voluntary participants to take additional time away from work, school, and/or their everyday lives to chronicle their information practices at a granular level, breaking apart situations of information seeking, evaluation, and sharing – instead of interpreting them as connected components of continuous conversion experiences.\textsuperscript{17} Since much of the content captured in the journals completed by pilot study participants overlapped with the experiences and issues discussed in interviews, I integrated select questions into the follow-up interview guide. This ensured that important points were not missed, and reduced the requested time commitment for participants. By omitting the journaling activity and guided tour from my project, my methods were more strategically aligned with an interpretive ethnographic framework, which focuses on the contextualized and situated nature of actions, conversations, and narratives (Cox, 2012, p. 180). While providing an opportunity to make the aforementioned amendments to my research design, the pilot study also affirmed the benefits of conducting two-part interviews, integrating a visual arts-based method in the follow-up interview, and combining participant observation with semi-structured narrative interviews for establishing trust and rapport, gaining access to Muslim organizations, and eliciting creative and evocative data.

3.4 Timeline drawings

“The term trajectory suggests not a path that can be foreseen or charted but a continuous motion... connects the past, the present, and the future”

“Making analysis and assumptions based on interviews, I have to rely on what people say. I thus depend on linguistic information – but this does not imply that I disregard the existence of nonlinguistic knowledge” (Mansson McGinty, 2006, pp. 34–5).

\textsuperscript{17} Organizational psychologist Laura Radcliffe noted similar limitations in her discussion of the effectiveness of diary techniques in qualitative research, noting the “level of participant commitment and dedication... and the burden that repeated responses places on participants... diaries are not always completed on time... slows down data collection and analysis” (2013, p. 174).
As outlined in the ethics protocol, follow-up interviews were designed to be approximately 60-90 minutes each and to integrate timelining and guided tours to elicit data about the details of participants’ information practices related to their conversion experiences – including how they make decisions about the credibility, value, and relevance of social, textual, and physical information sources (Lloyd, 2007). Graphic elicitation is a visual data collection method that incorporates drawing with interviews, and assumes that everyday life is composed of sensory dimensions that are not always expressed through words (Bagnoli, 2009; Prosser & Loxley, 2008, pp. 24–30). Timelining is a graphic elicitation technique that prompts participants’ reflections on their memories of the past, present experiences, and goals or expectations for the future through a drawing exercise (Bagnoli, 2009; Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011). Like other arts-based methods, timelining is intended to facilitate shared knowledge creation and understanding with participants (Jackson, 2012). It also offers an engaging and creative way to capture evocative data that may not be accessed through other methods, and provides the groundwork for further interview questions. An exercise such as timelining can create a chance for the researcher and participant to discuss “something they see together” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 149), rather than setting up a binary relationship built upon targeted lines of questioning towards the participant (ibid.).

At the beginning of follow-up interviews, I provided each participant with three blank, 8.5” x 11” sheets of paper (to prevent markers from bleeding through onto the table surface) and an open container containing a sharpened pencil and colour markers. I asked them to draw their conversion experiences, marking critical events and changes they have encountered along the way. To help address the limitation that timelining may prescribe a linear depiction of complex spiritual experiences, I applied an open-ended variation that allowed participants to envision and draw their conversion on paper, in whatever form it may take. (Ten participants completed the timelining exercise during follow-up interviews, with two participants opting out and one participant withdrawing after our initial interview.) Although several participants who consented to and completed the timelining exercise seemed tentative at first to draw their experiences, once they started drawing, they appeared to have fun with the activity and it created an additional avenue for discussion.
3.5 Participant observation and fieldnotes

The following table outlines the events (including respective dates and durations) that I attended as a participant observer:

Table 2. Participant Observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslimahs United Women’s Expo</td>
<td>November 2, 2014</td>
<td>10 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviving the Islamic Spirit Convention</td>
<td>December 27 &amp; 28, 2014</td>
<td>8 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for new Muslims</td>
<td>February 8, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for new Muslims</td>
<td>February 22, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for new Muslims</td>
<td>March 8, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for new Muslims</td>
<td>March 22, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for new Muslims</td>
<td>April 12, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for new Muslims</td>
<td>May 10, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious education class</td>
<td>February 25, 2015</td>
<td>1 hour + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious education class</td>
<td>March 25, 2015</td>
<td>1 hour + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for Muslims</td>
<td>February 12, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for Muslims</td>
<td>February 26, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for Muslims</td>
<td>March 5, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group for Muslims</td>
<td>March 26, 2015</td>
<td>2 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters iftar</td>
<td>July 3, 2015</td>
<td>4 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>44 hours + travel, fieldnotes writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To supplement interview transcripts and visual data, I wrote descriptive fieldnotes, based on my observations, impressions, and jottings (i.e., transitory notes, or what information researcher Danielle Cooper calls an “ephemeral aid” [2011]) taken during interviews and my attendance at public events hosted by local Muslim organizations (Emerson et al., 2011; Gilliat-Ray, et al., 2013). Descriptive fieldnotes are intended to record the researcher’s initial impressions of the field setting and his/her interactions within it (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 103; Emerson et al., 2011, p. 89), to reflect the daily experiences discussed by participants, and to eventually create “scenes” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 120) that help readers visualize what the researcher has observed (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 122). In line with the evaluation criteria outlined above, detailed, specific descriptions recorded in fieldnotes help to reflect credibility (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 103). Using fieldnotes as a starting point, I identified and created connections among these scenes by developing findings that center around participants’ experiences with information practices in their everyday lives (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 110). The process of fieldwriting is inherently interpretive, as the researcher continually improvises and makes stylistic and ethical decisions about how to represent events, conversations, and participants’ perspectives (Cerwonka, 2007, pp. 6, 20; Emerson et al., 2011, p. 89). By writing fieldnotes as promptly as possible following each interview and visit to field sites, I captured specific details about processes and phenomena that I observed and topics, issues, and problems raised by participants – including verbatim quotations and in vivo terms whenever possible (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 103; Charmaz, 2006, p. 22). By combining fieldwriting with the conversational and graphical elicitation techniques described above and participant observation, I worked towards producing a rich and complementary data set that acknowledges that meaning emerges from action and words (Gilliat-Ray, 2011).

4 Data Analysis and Writing

In line with interpretive ethnography, I applied a constructivist grounded theory approach to identify patterns of information practices, while emphasizing that data are co-constituted by researchers and participants through their social interactions (Bernard, 2011; Charmaz, 2002; Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the analysis process, I was mindful of Lloyd’s observation that, “data do not provide a window on an objective reality but [are] a negotiated interpretation
between the participants and the researchers about what experiences are meaningful to their practice” (Lloyd, 2009, p. 401).

The methods that I used to analyze data generated over the course of fieldwork were informed by my goal of understanding the meaning of the concepts and experiences that participants described (Bernard, 2011). After reviewing and becoming familiar with collected data, I did “line-by-line coding” (using the research software *NVivo* to highlight transcripts and fieldnotes) to produce initial codes (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 45–53). These initial codes provided an “analytic frame” (ibid.). Then, I compared topics that participants described and which I addressed in my fieldnotes, and subsequently compared these topics with my initial codes to identify similarities and differences related to participants’ information practices (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 53–4). By comparing topics and reviewing initial codes, I also identified duplicate codes that needed to be removed (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, pp. 160–70). This comparative process helped to categorize transcripts, fieldnotes, journal entries (from the pilot study), and timeline drawings into initial groups of related features and concepts – also known as “themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) – to be further explored in analytic memos. Referring to the initial codes, I recorded my observations of generated concepts and broader themes in analytic memos to explain how these themes were connected (Bernard, 2011; Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 123–6, 185–8, 193–7). By offering a space to actively develop my preliminary ideas, these memos provided a bridge between data collection and initial coding, and writing drafts of my thesis (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 72–83). As a space to explore my thoughts and draw connections, memos also acted as placeholders when identifying issues and phenomena to write about later, after returning to specific examples from my collection of fieldnotes, transcripts, and drawings.

I identified significant themes based on what they reflected regarding the relationship between participants’ experiences and my research questions and sensitizing concepts, instead of focusing on mere frequency across data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were based on patterns that I interpreted: recurring and common experiences among participants, and/or contrasting experiences and sentiments about an issue, across the data (i.e. fieldnotes describing actions and comments observed, transcripts of participants’ responses in interviews, and timeline drawings depicting key aspects of participants’ conversion experiences). I paid special attention to issues
and experiences that I understood to be significant to participants, staying mindful of my research questions but not deductively imposing themes upon data to answer pre-determined questions. It is worth noting that some of the themes inter-relate, yet themes did not necessarily pertain to every participant.18 By organizing data into themes, I was able to begin to develop findings (Fry & Talja, 2007, p. 120). Once I refined themes, I selected compelling excerpts from transcripts and visual data to analyze the connections among these examples, my research questions, and relevant concepts from the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The “node summaries” tool in NVivo helped me to collect excerpts under each code and relevant theme, which I then analyzed in the findings chapters. In comparison with initial coding, theme selection can be described as a process of “focused coding” or “narrowing” content from the more open-ended analytic memos and codes (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 188).

Visual data gathered from the timelining exercise are not merely supplemental to textual data, but contribute significantly to the process of understanding participants’ conversion experiences and their associated information practices (Bagnoli, 2009). As with the textual data generated through my research (i.e. transcripts, fieldnotes, journal entries), I applied a constructivist grounded theory approach to analyzing the visual data produced through participants’ drawings. In using grounded theory across the data set, I follow precedents set by social scientists who anticipated the possibility for applying the same analytic technique to different kinds of textual and non-textual data – even if their own work did not focus on visual data (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 13–16; Star, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). As Kathy Charmaz suggests, grounded theories are developed through engaging with detailed data that are generated through various collection methods which align with the researcher’s topic and are appropriate to access considerations (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 13–14). The drawings that participants produce through the timelining exercise do not act merely as artifacts to prompt reflection and conversation, but also as visual representations of key aspects of participants’ conversion experiences, to be “analyzed and placed in a larger framework” (Star, 1999, p. 388) of information practice. The goal of this ongoing analytic process was to abductively and reflexively construct a theoretical explanation – based on empirical material generated through

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18 This process of theme selection is described in detail by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011, pp. 188–191).
my research and its relationship to “existing theories and other studies” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 117) – of how information practices fit into spiritual or religious transitions such as conversion to Islam.

Following four months of data analysis (i.e. coding and writing memos), I “move[d] from field to desk” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 48) to write up my dissertation. Keeping with the ethnographic goal of highlighting participants’ perspectives, I selected excerpts from fieldnotes and interview transcripts, arranged them according to generated themes, and commented on what these excerpts reflected about how information practice mediates conversion experiences (Becker, 2007, p. 104; Emerson et al., 2011, p. 227). In an effort to organize themes into a coherent narrative about participants’ conversion experiences and the information practices that are involved in these experiences, I developed chapters around “excerpt-commentary units” (ECUs) that allocated space to field data and my interpretations (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 202–10). I situated the ECUs throughout the findings chapters to prioritize participants’ voices and perspectives, and to structure my analytic commentary around these units, based on my observations and connections to existing literature. I edited excerpts in the three findings chapters for coherence, to maintain focus on particular points and claims, to illustrate comparable or contrasting patterns across participants, and to be mindful of the reader’s time and attention. However, I decided against shortening the excerpts that introduce participants in Chapter Five (Context) to ensure that participants’ reflections that were linked to their timeline drawings were not fragmented, but preserved as whole, standalone stories in their own words. Here, I was inspired by the approach Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami takes to introduce informants in Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche – a non-fiction book that was recommended to me by another then-doctoral candidate at the time I was developing my thesis proposal. By structuring chapters according to themes rather than a chronological sequence of fieldwork events (Takhteyev, 2012), I was able to incorporate stories shared by multiple participants that illustrate the role that information seeking, evaluation and sharing play in developing Muslim identities (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 205). I decided on the themes after careful analysis of field data and discussions with my committee about what I thought should come to the foreground and background of the dissertation. While I did not have an exact formula for developing themes, they were intentionally woven together and mirror the
research questions. That is, the theme of “navigation” intentionally reflects the notion of “seeking” information, “authority” speaks to concerns about evaluating and assessing the trust and credibility of information, and “expression and exchange” are considered as two sides of a phenomenon tied to sharing information.

I began outlining themes by writing down what I understood to be the key points and patterns of experiences and concerns across the field data. This started with the following five points:

1) Searching for faith or “God/Islam finding me” (serendipity, seeking, and finding)
2) How do I know? (credibility assessment, textual interpretation, online evaluation, verifying hadith)
3) Teaching and learning (information sharing, social media)
4) Critiques and corrections (vocabulary, clothing, food; determining “proper” ways of being Muslim)
5) Presenting and responding (being Muslim in the public eye, Canadian visibility, Muslim identity).

Further analysis and discussions with my committee helped me to distill these five points into three overarching themes. The theme of navigation developed from my review of the field notes and interview transcripts generated through my fieldwork, as I noticed both metaphorical language about spiritual journeys and conversion as a process of finding one’s way, and references to the instruments used as part of this process (e.g. books, sermons, and mentors that served as spiritual compasses). The focus on authority developed partly from my review of the literature from information science on gatekeeping and assessing the trustworthiness of resources, and was supported by the emphasis placed on sources’ validity and authenticity during the religious courses and conventions I attended. I started to develop the last theme by thinking of how a few participants referred to confessing their conversion to family members and friends as a sort of “coming out” in which they presented themselves to others in a new way, even if they had already embraced or accepted Islam as their religion on their own terms. Often, feelings of self-consciousness during this coming out process were heightened by the political climate, which added to converts’ concerns about what assumptions their families and friends might bring to the news of their loved one’s conversion to Islam. These three themes collectively intersect and overlap on various points, as participants’ experiences were not confined to one theme or
another. The themes unfolded as I worked on preliminary drafts of the excerpt-commentary units for the findings chapters and went back to interview transcripts and field notes for inspiration of resonant issues and to integrate language from participants and the broader field as much as possible. Using a thematic structure allowed me to articulate “findings” as a narrative, drawing from the nuanced perspectives that participants shared about their information practices, rather than completely static categories or a rigid model focused solely on documents and their direct effects on behaviour. Writing involved an ongoing process of “revising and rethinking” (Becker, 2007, p. 103), and I valued my committee members’ methodological and theoretical expertise and suggestions as I completed this process.

The following illustration represents the sequence and timing of data collection, analysis, and writing procedures:

**Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

- **June 2014 – July 2015 Initial interviews**
  - Established trust, provided background re: participants’ conversion experiences, landscape of GTA Muslim communities – including recommendations of organizations to contact about participant observation

- **Nov. 2014 – July 2015 Participant observation**
  - Contextualized experiences, key issues and debates, role of institutions in knowledge construction and literacy

- **Sept. 2014 – Oct. 2015 Follow-up interviews**
  - With timeline drawings; Elicited reflections, prompted conversation re: experiences of seeking and learning from information sources

- **June 2015 – Nov. 2015 Data analysis**
  - Reviewed data, generated initial codes, compared topics with codes, removed duplicate codes, categorized data into initial groups of themes, produced analytic memos, developed and refined themes, selected and arranged excerpts under 3 main themes

Chapter 5
Research Context

1 Field site as sociocultural network

Given the multi-dimensionality of religious identity and the diverse backgrounds of Muslim converts living in the GTA, Jenna Burrell’s conceptualization of the ethnographic field site as a network is a useful point of methodological departure for my study (Burrell, 2009). With reference to her fieldwork on ICT appropriation in Accra, Ghana, Burrell draws on George Marcus’s conception of the modes that bind multiple sites (Marcus, 1998). She suggests that rather than perceiving field sites as stand-alone entities, we should regard them as networks constructed through the interactions between participants and phenomena (Burrell, 2009). Burrell argues that such an understanding of field sites is aligned with “the emic ideal of ethnographic practice” (Burrell, 2009, p. 195). Hanna Carlsson and colleagues elaborate on this concept in their discussion of how ethnographic methods are used in library and information studies research (Carlsson et al., 2013). Specifically, the authors call for an approach to ethnographic research that facilitates the exploration of information phenomena as it “travels through, and gets entangled with, different spaces, places, things, and practices” (ibid.). Multi-sited ethnographers allow participants to lead them in their research, and embrace and adapt to unanticipated “happy accidents” that answer the question, “where should I go next?” (Dylan Gordon, Ethnography Lab talk, Oct. 23, 2015). This sensibility can be applied to documents, spaces, objects, and activities (in addition to people).

Rather than setting out with a single physical site in mind, researchers who conceptualize field sites as networks move between the places that participants occupy – on- and off-line. In the case of my research, this multi-sited focus meant visiting convert support groups in homes and mosques, and campus-based religious clubs and organizations, in addition to following discussions on social media and email newsletters from local spiritual care and Islamic education.

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19 See also Murchison & Coats (2015), Ethnography of Religious Instants: Multi-Sited Ethnography and the Idea of "Third Spaces."
centres. I needed to build trust and rapport not only through the way I spoke with organizational
gatekeepers and research participants and the way I dressed, but also through how I
communicated about my project in online conversations. By staying mindful of certain norms in
an effort to be as respectful as possible (e.g. wearing modest clothing, removing shoes at
entrances to prayer spaces, sitting in designated areas for women) and remaining open to
fieldwork opportunities as they arose, I was able to navigate through parts of the complex social
world of Muslim converts in the GTA.

In her discussion about the value of “information circuits” in 19th century North Africa, historian
Julia Clancy-Smith suggests that, “all members of indigenous society had a hand in constructing
the discursive field that determined not only what people talked about but also what they chose
to do or not to do” (1994, pp. 261-262). Clancy-Smith talks about how over the 19th century, the
information circuits that served as the main source of news and rumours expanded
geographically; these networks connected Europeans with North Africans, rural communities
with urban centres, and North African capitals with each other (ibid.). In my research, while
situated in a vastly different context than the one Clancy-Smith describes (i.e. within a
contemporary timeframe and the geographic boundaries of the GTA), I have similarly needed to
consider how different kinds of knowledge are produced within and with reference to different
Muslim organizations, communities, and places that are significant to local participants’
conversion experiences. The women and men who participated in my project are connected to a
broader setting of information sources, epistemic cultures, schools of thought, and theological
standpoints beyond the GTA. Through their exposure to and engagement with scholars, peers,
and religious leaders based in different parts of the world, they link different kinds of knowledge.
Not only are there denominational differences (e.g. Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Ismaili, etc.) to navigate,
but there are also public-facing organizations (e.g. ISNA, ICNA) who offer official stances on
key issues such as interfaith relations, charity and humanitarianism, and theological questions
about marriage and family life.

These considerations align with the notion of “religious information landscapes,” defined as
“network[s] through which information regarding a religion is exchanged” (Gorichanaz, 2015, p.
6), and which includes “sites where believers gather; religious objects and their use; social
networks; prayers, rituals and sacred texts; rulings, exegeses, sermons and other interpretations; and books and other sources that relate religious belief and practice to everyday life” (ibid.).

While networks facilitate exchanges related to religion, they also involve navigation. As the following findings chapters will point out, Muslim converts’ experiences of learning their religion involve figuring out which information sources (including educational institutes, speakers, and social media platforms) are relevant and trustworthy. Throughout the process of connecting with other adherents – whether online or in-person – Muslim converts balance their individual choices with norms about how to pray, fast, dress, speak, and verify the authenticity of texts. The anthropologist Erkan Toğuşlu reminds his readers of the need to focus on:

“Daily life practices to see how Muslims [in Europe] reconfigure the space in which they live and how they locate themselves vis-à-vis the debates surrounding them. A multiplicity of spaces and borders affects their daily practices, so social relationships produce new dynamics of existing and interacting with local and global issues” (2015, p. 217).

The impact of local and global spaces, borders, and debates on daily practices similarly applies in the GTA, where Muslim converts are part of a larger network of peer believers around the world and yet have varying degrees of access to local resources to support their religious transitions. Considerations of the connections among individual believers, religious communities, social practices, and information sources are especially relevant as online communication is increasingly the norm. As media scholar Heidi Campbell argues in her analysis of the internet as “common mental geography” (2005), the internet is “more than a tool for communication, but a mechanism that individuals can use to construct a common worldview” (p. 115). Another model Campbell discusses is the “internet as social network,” which suggests that people connect with others who share similar interests (2005, p. 118): “Borders are erased, as the person in the next room or on the next continent is only an email away” (ibid.).20 Related to self-presentation, Campbell adds that the internet can also be considered as an “identity workshop,” in the sense that people can go online to highlight and conceal particular traits to their liking (2005, p. 116). Moreover, “individuals construct their online persona by the texts they generate and the online sources or sites they link themselves to” (Campbell, 2005, p. 116).

20 See also Appadurai’s Modernity at Large (1996), which examines the author’s concept of “mediascape” – transnational flows and reinventions of popular culture and identity resources via electronic and print media.
In the same article, Campbell introduces the notion that the internet can be viewed as “sacramental space,” in that people use the internet to look for “religious information and communities, as well as spiritual enlightenment and experiences online” (2005, p. 119). Campbell concludes that “as sacramental space the internet can be used to help form religious identity, as a space for personal spiritual pursuits, as a social spiritual support sphere and as a spiritual tool” (2005, p. 130). Campbell’s reflections on each of these internet models affirm the important role that online networks – and in-person ones – play in establishing shared worldviews, connecting to like-minded peers, constructing personal identities, and finding religious information. All of these practices factored into participants’ stories and the conversations in which I took part at various sites over the course of my fieldwork.

2 Temporal and geopolitical considerations

North American mainstream media and government policy discourse tends to simplify conversion to Islam, by suggesting that converts uncritically accept what they are told by those who present themselves as religious authorities or leaders of extremist groups, and are therefore vulnerable to recruitment. In contrast, my research reinforces the idea that conversion to Islam is a gradual process (indeed, many participants in my project considered conversion to be lifelong), which involves extensive research and reflection; social interaction with multiple groups, communities, and organizations; critical analysis and evaluation of various resources and scholarly opinions; and numerous modes of sharing information related to Islam and Muslim spirituality and identity (e.g. via social media, personal conversations, teaching, publishing).

21 See, e.g., February 2016 article in Maclean’s about efforts by ISIS and al-Qaeda to recruit Muslim converts from western countries via magazines. For analysis of western (pre-9/11) media discourse about Islam in general, see Said, 1997. For analysis of the relationship between government policy and Islamophobia in the U.S., see Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) report (2013): http://www.cair.com/images/islamophobia/Legislating-Fear.pdf For analysis on Islamophobic attitudes embedded in Canadian legislation, see articles on Bill C-51 (e.g. Madondo, 2015); Quebec’s proposed “Charter of Values” (e.g. Flanagan, 2014; Macpherson, 2016; Sharify-Funk, 2011); and debates about Muslim women wearing niqab during Canadian citizenship ceremonies (e.g. Chowdhury, 2015; CityNews, 2015).
In the absence of statistics and with limited literature on Muslim converts in Canada, it is difficult to speculate generally about their education levels. The U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data about religious affiliation, and Canada’s statistical data on religious affiliation has been limited since 2010 to the voluntary National Household Survey (NHS), which is conducted every five years.\(^2\) With the reinstatement of the mandatory Long-form Census in 2016, a more complete picture of Canadians’ religious affiliation is eventually possible. Still, the Canadian Census only collects information on religion every ten years, with the most recent data having been collected through the 2011 Census. Additionally, the Environics Institute – in collaboration with Tessellate Institute, Olive Tree Foundation, Inspirit Foundation, Canadian Race Relations Foundation, and Think for Actions – released the “Survey of Muslims in Canada” report in April 2016 (Environics, 2016). This survey built upon the 2006 Environics survey, which is the only national, quantitative study of Canadian Muslim opinions (Bullock, in Quran Speaks, 2015). Nonetheless, the level of detail about religious affiliation included in this survey and in the Census – and patterns that could be identified and analyzed vis-à-vis adherence to religions, religious switching, and education – is unknown. In the meantime, scholarship that increases awareness about the lived experiences of Muslim converts (and adherents to other religious groups) is imperative.

One temporal consideration worth noting is the range of years when participants “officially” converted to Islam (i.e. by reciting the *shahadah*), and the corresponding types of information that were available when participants marked their conversion (or the start of their conversion “journey.”) While some participants – namely, Aisha, Olivier, Liam, and Rachel – converted within about a year of meeting with me for interviews, others – such as January – found the “convert” label to be problematic since they have self-identified as Muslim for more than a decade. The rest of the men and women I met with told me they converted between three and

\(^2\) An article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* estimates that 20% of American Muslims are converts (Bolovnikova, 2013). For statistics on U.S. Muslim demographics, see Lipka, 2016, and:
For projections of U.S. Muslim population, see:
eight years before my fieldwork began. Because of this range in time, participants described their interactions with different kinds of information sources. For example, Abdullah, who embraced Islam when he was in middle school (17 years ago), spoke about borrowing a VHS recording of lectures by Muslim scholars from his local mosque, and has only recently had to contend with the challenges of verifying online content about his religion. In contrast, Seif, who recited the shahadah after completing his bachelor’s degree (approximately three years before we met), became interested in Islam and the Middle East after September 11, 2001, when news and information about the religion proliferated online.

In terms of the geographic setting for my study, the GTA is a large, Canadian, metropolitan area that provides access to different kinds of resources and various Muslim communities (many of them centered around a shared ethnicity or nationality). Like many metropolitan areas of comparable scale, the GTA offers choice and anonymity. This relative variety presents potential opportunities for converts to choose communities that resonate with them. One might also expect that living in a large city allows converts to move freely between mosques and make their personal religious decisions without drawing much attention from neighbours. At the same time, the GTA presents its own set of challenges – namely, ethnic and sectarian divides, linguistic limitations, and barriers to entry. For instance, Hermione described her experience of trying to fit in at a local mosque that was established by, and whose congregation was primarily composed of, Khoja community members (an ethnic group to which she recognized she does not belong). Other participants, such as Olivier, identified similar challenges, noting that ethnic and linguistic divides can make it difficult to connect with a Muslim community.

Of the 13 Muslim converts with whom I met for interviews, five had migrated to Canada from other countries. Given statistics on migration to the GTA and other major Canadian cities (Statistics Canada, 2011a), this number is not out of the ordinary. Still, it drew my attention to similarities between conversion and migration, in terms of making a transition to a new community or place, and all of the information-related activities that such a transition entails (e.g. learning to read and speak a new language, networking among a new group of people, and navigating social institutions, rules, norms, and systems). A more detailed exploration of information practice in the context of migration to Canada presents promising avenues for future
research, especially at a time when Canada is resettling thousands of Syrian refugees and migrants from other countries. For some participants in this study, migration experiences were closely intertwined with experiences of conversion to Islam. For example, Hermione embraced Shia practices, which were influenced by her grandmother and ties to her cultural heritage, in spite of her parents’ resistance. Jennifer’s conversion followed her formal education in religious studies while she pursued her law degree in Europe before moving to Canada. Olivier’s introduction to Islam was through a mentor and friend he met after moving to the U.S. from Europe. In our conversations, he indicated a continued need for mentorship, which may be influenced by his upbringing in the Lutheran church where there is a tradition of religious authority and leadership in addition to community life. Alexandra was raised in a country where Christian traditions shaped holidays and everyday life, but she and her family did not regularly attend church. She added that she never really “believed or identified with Christianity,” nor did she have “an investigative stage where [she] would look up the different religions and try them out.” Instead, Alexandra was introduced to Islam through friends in college who shared a similar lifestyle and priorities, and she took her time learning about the religion before making a formal declaration of faith. Seif moved to Canada at a young age, and spent his teenage years involved at a Christian evangelical church, where he formed a close mentorship with the church’s youth pastor. A few years after this pastor passed away, Seif moved to another province to begin university. It was at this university that he cultivated his understanding of Islam through Muslim friends. This pattern of being introduced to Islam through Muslim friends at college or university – and through courses or while travelling in Muslim countries – has been noted elsewhere in the literature on conversion to Islam from the past 10 years (e.g., Mansson McGinty, 2006; van Nieuwkerk, 2008). It also reflects the socioeconomic status of participants, the majority of whom had some form of post-secondary education by the time we met.

Additionally, four participants did not identify with a particular branch or denomination of Islam. Liam’s lack of specific denominational affiliation may be explained by the fact that his conversion was directly influenced by his marriage to a woman from a Muslim family, and he admitted that he did not actively practice Islam through regular mosque attendance or adhering to daily prayer times. For Olivier and Rachel, who marked their conversion within less than two years of our interviews, their continued exploration of their relatively recently embraced religion
(and especially Olivier’s expressed concerns about not having enough time to read about Islam, his negotiations with a non-practicing partner, and the lack of mentorship and resources for Muslim converts living in the downtown core) may be linked to their hesitance in self-identifying strongly with one branch over another. Still, it is noteworthy that Rachel found a mosque community in which she feels welcomed. The importance of belonging to a congregation may have special resonance for her, as someone who grew up actively participating in the Anglican church and even considering a Christian vocation. Alexandra noted that she and her husband regularly attend a local mosque, but did not elaborate on her denominational commitments when we met for interviews. Nonetheless, she did describe how her clothing subscribes to Islamic guidelines, and how some of these guidelines (e.g. headscarf) resemble traditions in the country of her childhood.

While generally regarded as an open-minded and cosmopolitan centre, the GTA is situated within a fraught geopolitical climate in which Islamophobia is increasingly pronounced. After the October 2014 attack on Parliament Hill, the January and November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, and the December 2015 shooting in San Bernardino, several incidents of anti-Muslim graffiti, verbal abuse, and violence were reported by GTA residents. Although such abuse has been publicly condemned in statements by politicians, community leaders, and student groups, perceptions about conversion to Islam as a threat to national security, Canadian identity, and secularism remain prevalent. In this environment, Muslim converts’ comfort and confidence to

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23 The Environics survey reported that the dominant concerns facing Muslims in their local communities are “discrimination or poor treatment (15%), Islamophobia (13%), stereotyping by the media (12%) or related issues, such as fear for one’s safety in public (e.g., being attacked on the street)” (Environics, 2016, p. 22). Media portrayals of Muslims in Canada was reportedly especially concerning to Muslims “born in Canada (80%) or Africa (77%)” and to “women, those aged 45 and younger, and those who identify primarily as Muslim” (Environics, 2016, p. 23).

24 See, e.g., CBC News, 2015; Kohut, 2015. Similar incidents have been reported in other parts of Canada (see, e.g., Nasser, 2015). These incidents reflect the reported increase in online Islamophobia (Spence, 2014) and hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims in Canada (Allen, 2015; Environics, 2016; Jamil, 2012; National Council of Canadian Muslims, 2014) and elsewhere (e.g., Belgium, see Keating, 2015).

25 As a point of comparison, according to an article in The Atlantic, converts to Islam “accounted for 67 percent of American Muslims involved in committing or planning an ISIS-related attack” even though they represent 20% of Muslims in the U.S. Additionally, Muslim converts “have been involved in 31% of jihadist terrorism convictions in the UK from 2001 to 2010” while they represent approximately 3% of the 2.8 million Muslims living in the UK (Cottee, 2016). The Environics (2016) survey report noted that “Canadians are among the most secular people in the world, and this presents a different context for individuals who immigrate with non-western religious traditions” (p. 3).
publicly display their religious commitments (e.g. through reading the Quran on the subway) without fear of abuse is at risk. In a poignant anecdote, Ruqayyah recalled how neighbours of the children she tutored threw objects at her from their balconies, as she walked by wearing niqab. When the only stories the public learns through mainstream media and popular culture (e.g. the television program, Homeland) are those of radicalized terrorists – without also hearing from Muslim converts who do not identify with violent inclinations or practices – an entire religious group is dangerously and unfairly vilified. This dissertation draws theoretical attention to the informational aspects of religious conversion, and to the ways that processes of information seeking and use can be spiritually rewarding. It is also an attempt to balance the rhetorical scales, and it would not have been possible without the stories shared by those who participated in this project.

3 Introduction to Research Participants

The following section introduces the women and men who generously took part in my research. Listed in the order I met them are their timeline drawings and connected narratives about important events and changes they encountered as part of their conversion experiences. Participants who completed the drawings as part of follow-up interviews reflected on their lives before embracing Islam, their present experiences, and their goals and expectations for the future, as they relate to what being Muslim means to them. Opportunities for participants to reflect on their conversion trajectories were not limited to those who completed the timeline drawings, but were part of all interviews. When listening to these narratives, I kept in mind anthropologist Anna Mansson McGinty’s suggestion that “the convert draws on the past not only to negotiate a sense of continuity but also to display transformation” (2006, p. 41). The narratives told to me were not static entities, but relational reflections that were negotiated in the moment, “between self and other” (Mansson McGinty, 2006, p. 51). While this is not to suggest that participants’ narratives were fabricated, I was aware that the details they shared were framed by the fact that our conversations occurred for research purposes in the context of interviews (not informal conversations between friends), that our roles as non-Muslim researcher and Muslim research participants were declared during the consent process, and that responses were made in reference to specific interview questions and prompts.
Aisha is a 36-year-old Canadian career counselor who works at a post-secondary institution and is completing her master’s degree in Education. She started self-identifying as a convert to Islam about one year before we met. While she was christened in the United Church, she did not actively participate in this religion growing up or as an adult. As she completed the above timeline drawing, Aisha described her conversion to Islam as follows:

“My Islam probably started on her couch, with coffee in a very relaxed, friendly setting… As we went through the process, I probably went immediately to the Quran… But that’s a really hard book to start with… Then you start to Google things… And after that was when I got more into like, formal learning. I mean, in terms of classroom learning… At that point, that’s a great time to come back to the Quran… You have so much more context, the more you learn, to kind of make sense of all that.”

Aisha characterized her conversion experience as highly interpersonal, with her friends introducing her to Islam and with her regular attendance at mosque events and extracurricular religious education courses. Although she self-identifies as Sunni and prays and volunteers at a
local mosque that similarly aligns itself with this denomination, Aisha did not specify a particular theological school of thought or organization that resonates most with her.

Kelly

Kelly is a 32-year-old researcher and project manager with a master’s degree and professional certificate in Community and Development, who works at a non-profit organization. She was born in East Africa and moved to Canada at age one. While she officially marked her “reversion” to Islam four years before we met, Kelly described her ongoing experience of learning as follows:

“I know that I’ve been Muslim all my life… but I never understood why I called myself a Muslim until very recently… I’m always more interested in learning and knowledge seeking that’s logical, and grounded in firm facts about Islam… It’s not an emotional response to these topics, it’s a factual response that’s guided by a lineage of scholars… I guess I come from a background too, I identify as an academic, and I approach Islam in a very academic way. It’s in my heart, an emotional response, but the truth of it coming out to me, and it resonating with me, is really about, this is logical. This makes sense.”

Like Aisha, Kelly self-identifies as Sunni but remains open to learning from a variety of information sources, communities, and organizations – especially those that take an academic approach and are directed toward young professional Muslims.

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26 Withdrew from study after initial interview and did not complete a timeline drawing.
Alexandra is a 26-year-old woman who completed her master’s degree in Creative Writing shortly before we met. She is an aspiring writer and artist, and works part-time at a café in her neighbourhood. Born in eastern Europe, Alexandra moved to Canada when she was 12. She marked her conversion in college, about eight years before we met. Alexandra noted that her conversion “kind of just overlaps with the process of my life”:

“From the time of my arrival in Canada… Before that, I feel like whatever I left in [eastern European country], that’s sort of a different life… And there was a bunch of years in high school that were, at that time, you know high school seems long when you’re there. And yet, now I think of it, those years had no impact on my life whatsoever. Which is kind of why I just wrote them as a bunch of swirly, tiny little dots… And then, college and university were proportionately so much more impactful in so much less time… I can draw some little people [draws], a lot of people, holding hands, or, [draws] not holding hands… This is representative of a bigger step of my journey, just getting to know a lot of people and therefore having a lot of different interactions and ideas… And then going to Toronto, and from now I know that Islam was part of my life… It doesn’t define necessarily my individual journey in life… I don’t have this whole thing, like, ‘Oh, what is next?’ … It doesn’t mean I won’t question what’s happening in my life, but… at
least at the moment, I don’t feel like I’m struggling with that particularly. It’s more of, okay, let’s just get through, day by day, see what can be done every day, see what ways I can improve or run my life and build a family. And just like, I guess, regular concerns… At a certain point you don’t necessarily have like, these big unresolved questions anymore. You just want to improve on a given road that you’re on. But that’s sort of a lifelong process. And at least you know that, okay, I’m going to do as much as I can get done, in the space of my life.”

Unlike Kelly and Aisha, Alexandra did not indicate whether she follows a particular denomination or theological stance. Rather, she emphasized the importance of open-mindedness, attention to context, and a “weighted nuanced consideration” in the information sources she listens to, reads, and shares with her peers.

Olivier

Olivier is a 30-year-old university graduate and former political campaign staffer. After moving to the U.S. as an adult from western Europe and living there for several years, Olivier moved to
Toronto in 2011. He started self-identifying as Muslim approximately one year before we met. As he drew the timeline above, Olivier said:

“A lot happened in 2012 and 2013… a lot of reading, a lot of thinking. Kind of like a quick conversion. And then in 2013, one thing that changed was, this friendship-slash-mentorship that had ended. My daughter was born, and got super busy with the combination of work and having a daughter at home. Then I went on parental leave. And then in 2014, a similar thing where, I was on parental leave until May, and then I got really busy working on a number of campaigns. And so, as much as I didn’t really want it to be that way, I think that my spirituality has taken a bit of a back seat…. Except for a few single events, I’ve not taken any sort of structured class, I’ve not done nearly as much reading as I wanted to… Plus some of the key people disappeared… This year in the spring, kind of my main Muslim friend… moved back to the Gulf… That was a bit of a setback because he was one of the few people that I talked to about those kind of spiritual issues. And he introduced me to [Muslim organization] … Obviously there’s stuff that’s in the future that’s kind of a wish list.”

While Olivier did not specify his denomination, his comments during our interview conversations indicated a tendency to prefer information sources from Sufi traditions and progressive organizations (i.e. those with social justice concerns and egalitarian gender relations). The importance of having a mentor aligns with Olivier’s orientation towards Sufi traditions, which emphasize divine connection and knowledge transmission through direct personal, spiritual guidance from mystical role models, teachers and mentors (Dickson & Sharify-Funk, forthcoming).

**Hermione**

Hermione is a 24-year-old graduate student who was completing her master’s degree in Interdisciplinary Studies when we met. She was born and raised in a northern European country, where her parents immigrated from the Middle East before her birth. At age 19, she moved to western Europe to study Law and Art History, and moved to Canada three years later. She converted to Islam four years before we met and self-identifies as Shia, but did not specify a particular school of thought or law within this denomination.
“I started with this spiral thing ‘cause that was the first thing that came to my mind... When I was thinking about my conversion experience, that was something that came up, something bright and that had some sort of movement to it but was going towards the centre... I wanted to capture the sort of like, rich experiences and emotions and everything that were involved... And then later, I saw that it could look like a kind of snail shell. Which made me really happy, because I love snails... The snail reminds me of all the things I didn't really understand before, that I just see differently now. I think snails are really beautiful now... There’s something interesting about something so small and, to us, seemingly insignificant. We’re so busy with our lives and everything, but that snail is just doing what it’s doing... And the tree was, sort of like, obligatory, I thought. Because I connect it to knowledge, learning a lot of new stuff but also, well I love trees... They always make me feel very safe, or very grounded... And I wanted something with long roots. Because I feel like I’ve dipped into something that has a lot of tradition and connections. And then, I really wanted to draw individual leaves, but couldn’t be bothered. [laughs] ... It reminds me of time, and changes and recognizing or being aware of how odd self-importance is and all of that when you’re just another leaf on the tree... The horse is about... I have some experience with horseback riding. And I remember the rush of when you just let the horse control the speed and it just goes really fast... Those moments when you’re rushing forward and you can’t even notice the details around you. It’s exhilarating. And it’s also kind of unbelievable because the whole time you’re thinking, I could fall off and die. Or I could just have a really great experience. And I think of my conversion process and everything – even up to this day – has personally been overwhelmingly positive. But sometimes it feels like I’ve almost jumped on a horse that was already galloping and I’m like, ‘Whew!’”

Hermione explained the symbols she depicted in her drawing as follows:27

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27 Hermione’s drawing is in three parts. When conducting the timeline drawings, I left participants three blank sheets of paper on the table to prevent markers from bleeding through onto the surface (usually, a table in a café or library). Hermione continued to draw, using all three sheets of paper. Since I designed the timeline drawing exercise to be as flexible as possible to allow participants to express their narratives in their own way, I decided not to stop Hermione from drawing. This allowed for a rich discussion during which Hermione elaborated on the images she depicted.
“The attempt at drawing something Arabesque was a reminder of… when I was going through the literal conversion process and I was really thinking like, okay, is this how I feel, is this what I’m doing? I was in [Middle Eastern country] and I was walking in the living room in my grandmother’s house, and there was a carpet there. And I was just walking in circles and circles, ‘cause I just think you think more clearly when you’re walking. And I remember I would stare at these Arabesques just being like, ‘Make sense!’... I was first thinking the moon and the ocean, because of the gravitational effects, that the moon especially has on water. And I connect it a lot to nature… I wanted the vastness of the ocean and the kind of depth and the unknown element. I wanted it to be, kind of like, dark, kind of wall, but without it being a negative thing… Because I’ve always found the ocean very fascinating and very frightening at the same time. I grew up in a coastal city, so I was by the ocean all the time… Despite this apparent darkness to it, the ocean itself isn’t dark…And the moon, well obviously, in the process, I felt that something was pulling me towards something… And then, okay, so that’s supposed to be a reed flute. And that’s supposed to be a kind of a drum… When someone who knows how to play it plays a reed flute, the sound it makes, like it can convey so much more than I can.”
“I was drawing and I noticed I had all these positive things. And then I remembered that it all came almost with a price… I had to go through a lot of negative experiences… Which is this [points to third page with primarily grey and black triangle shape] before I could get to this part [points to first two pages of drawing with tree, horse, etc.]. But in a way, I feel like I have been in this space [motions to first two pages with tree, etc.] before converting… I wouldn’t want to draw a line and be like, this is before my conversion and this is after. Because that would be unfair to my life before that… I didn’t want it to be overtly negative. But I wanted it to be a bit chaotic.”
January

January is a 28-year-old Canadian woman of Ashkenazi and western European descent who was completing her master’s degree in Theology and Muslim Studies when we met. She converted to Islam 16 years ago as a teenager while living in South Asia with her family. As January recalled:

“I remember, I was very interested in Islam. And I was asking a lot of questions and stuff like that. I got an English translation of the Quran ‘cause I asked my parents to buy it for me for Christmas… They got it after Christmas… And I remember reading it, and I was very interested. And we had a guy who worked for us… and he was very religious. And I would ask him questions about Islam… and he’d tell me some Quranic surahs and stuff like that. So it just kind of happened. I don’t think there’s any celebrations. It wasn’t like Ramadan or Eid, or anything like that… And he said, ‘Okay, so this is how you make shahadah, this is how you say it.’ And that’s kind of what happened.”

January’s concerns about social justice suggest a similar progressive orientation to Olivier’s, and she added that, “I like to tell people I’m Su-Shi… But I’m Sunni by default.”

28 Opted out of producing a timeline drawing during the follow-up interview.
Jennifer

Jennifer is a 44-year-old woman who completed her master’s degree in Public Policy just before our follow-up interview. Before pursuing her master’s degree, Jennifer worked as a lawyer in her native country in western Europe. She moved to Canada in 2001. Although she acknowledges that she became Muslim as a university student in her native country, Jennifer noted that she “does not like the term ‘convert’” since there was no “epiphany.” She added that concepts such as “convert” and “revert” imply that something fundamental changes in your identity, rather than her experience of being the same person for your whole life. Rather than following a particular Islamic school of law, Jennifer said, “I’m Sunni, that’s it.” Given her training as a lawyer and education in public policy, it is not surprising that Jennifer expressed a preference for organizations that facilitate dialogue and critical thinking about religion, and for scholarly sources of information that articulate support for their claims and have been peer-reviewed before publication.
Jennifer explained her timeline drawing as follows:

“So I was born in 1970 but I started at 1977… when I remember religion first… See, faith is difficult, right…. There are two dimensions to it. One is like the puritanical kind of thing… the way people – other people – try to impose rules and things on you and then there’s your own feeling of how religious you are… So sometimes when you reject these kind of notions that people have, you feel like you’re on a lower end of faith. But you aren’t. Like your spirituality might be high, but in view of other people who have a certain idea of how you have to be, you might be at a low point. And then you kind of adopt the label… This would be [points to coloured lines on drawing] the faith, this would be the emotional development, and this would be the consciousness or the knowledge… This was Confirmation [writes on paper]. 1984… This was my atheist time, kind of, here [labels drawing]. This was when I moved to [city in western Europe] and started religious studies [labels drawing]. So that was while I was in law school, I went a little bit off and did some other stuff on the side… I did like two years, basic minor… 1997, you would say, conversion, kinda [labels drawing]. 2001, coming to Canada [labels drawing]. Getting married, 2005, we moved, to [city outside Toronto]. And I started working in 2008, and then I went to school in 2010.”

29 Similar to Hermione, Jennifer continued her timeline drawing beyond a single page. (Her timeline continued onto the back of the first page.) Again, this exercise facilitated a deeper conversation which focused on the relationship between Jennifer’s conversion and specific details and events that she visually depicted.
Olivier’s wife

Olivier’s wife is a 31-year-old finance and banking professional who was born and raised in East Asia. She said she has been an atheist her whole life, but that her mother recently converted to Christianity and is quite fervent, slipping in hints in conversations to try and convince her to convert. She added that her husband is also fervent, but does not push his religion since he knows that she is an atheist and they respect each other’s beliefs. She met Olivier in 2009, before he converted to Islam. Olivier’s wife recalled that when he told her he had converted, she reacted with “a bit of surprise,” as he is not “mainstream” in anything. She initially thought his conversion was “just a phase” of experimentation, but admitted that it does not seem that way anymore. When she became pregnant with their daughter, they had plans to baptize her by the same priest who married them in the Lutheran church. However, those plans are “on hold.” Olivier’s wife described how her husband’s conversion requires adjusting. For instance, she

30 Did not produce a timeline drawing, as it was not built into the research design for interviews with participants’ family members/partners.
mentioned a time when he was praying in their room and she walked in without knocking, not realizing he was in prayer, and how this was “kind of awkward” because he is new to the religion and still somewhat self-conscious. On the topic of prayer, she said it can be challenging when they are about to leave the house and he has to pray “just for a few minutes” – even though “it doesn’t always feel that way.” Olivier’s wife said that the other major thing to adjust to is Ramadan, especially when it happens during the summer. The fasting and prayer schedule disrupts Olivier’s sleep and daily routines such as eating together and having the energy to help take care of their 18-month-old daughter. This past Ramadan, she negotiated with him to break the fast one day per week, and then add that day to the end of the month, since it is especially hard when they go out for dinner with friends on weekends. Olivier’s wife said that their daughter has recently started “mimicking” her husband when he prays, and she finds joy in that. She is not concerned about this imitation, since they have no plans to impose religion on their child, and other than being more drawn toward Muslim friends, her husband’s worldview and outlook on life, politics, and society have not changed.

Seif
Seif is a 26-year-old freelance journalist who has a postgraduate degree in his field. Born in East Asia, Seif moved to Canada as a child, where he finished elementary and secondary school. He completed his bachelor’s degree in the GTA, and it was shortly after graduating (about three years before we met) that he converted to Islam. Seif self-identifies as Sunni and follows what he calls “mainstream Islam” – that is, “orthodox Islam” as represented by scholars such as Hamza Yusuf, which focuses less than progressive approaches to Islam on making “reformations” or “improvements to update ourselves with the times;” instead, it emphasizes staying “faithful to 1400 years of Muslim intellectual legacy.” Seif explained the following pivotal event in his life, which he marked on his timeline drawing:

“2004, I think… It was towards my last few months of working with the youth within the church that I attended in [western Canadian suburb] … He [youth pastor] was 33 years old and he got a job on the Friday of Easter weekend… And then, on the Monday, he ended up in a car crash… If he was still alive today, I think it would be a very different future, a very different path I would have taken… I don’t think it’s exclusive to [east Asian] community, but most immigrant youth that come over, they’re still growing into the person you’re going to become. So you’re still looking for different ways of looking at the world, religiously or, you’re just sort of still building your own worldview. And part of it has to do with yourself, but a huge portion of that process has to do with the people around you and how they push you one way or the other… It becomes difficult for young people of other ethnic backgrounds coming into Canada to relate, both to their parents in certain ways and then, on the other hand, to your teachers or your friends or whatever… I think most kids, whether they know it or not, they stick to people who can or seem to be able to give them that kind of a relationship. So I think he was like that. And it was just by pure happenstance that we ended up crossing paths… He gave me a religious sort of guidance, spiritual guidance… With him out of the picture, it’s sort of like, the process of looking at the world becomes just different. Plus, I was away from my family… If he were still around… I can’t say for sure that I would have taken the path to be a Muslim… It was only because of other influences at the time that I decided to sort of step out of the faith in the first place.”
Liam is a 43-year-old Canadian of northwestern European descent who works as a therapist and holds a postgraduate degree in his profession. His conversion, which happened one year before we met, was motivated by plans to marry his now-wife, whose parents are Muslims from Northeastern Africa and the Middle East. He does not identify with any particular denomination or school of thought within Islam. Liam described his timeline drawing as follows:

“I drew a crescent moon to represent Islam… And then I came back to the idea of being a bit more representational with the theme of Islam. And two things came to mind: One, we were just at my in-laws’ for a wedding ceremony last weekend. And I really love the look of Arabic art – the Arabic writing, it’s all over their house. My father-in-law is very very [Northeastern African] and very very proud Muslim. So they’ve got some really beautiful art. So there’s one, kind of a framed piece with the writing. And then this is, I think it’s a
brass, or even gold maybe, etched, really really intricate wall plate. And it’s just got beautiful writing and I guess that’s what I find beautiful about it is that the writing, kind of like this, becomes the art... And then I realized that, especially after this last weekend, I do have a lot of questions about the culture and the in-quotes ‘practice,’ practices, within the religion. And having converted but not necessarily considering myself a practicing Muslim, I’m still embedded in a lot of ways. At least in that context, where I am one of the only white people in the room, and seeing the way people greet each other and not feeling a part of it, and knowing people treat me differently and things like that. And just things like, at one point, looking down the hall and seeing a group of men praying... I just felt strange in that scene. My sense is that there are – like in any religion – there are ways of being. And... in terms of my own exploration of who I am, what does this way of being have to do with who I am, and when I encounter it – that way of being, or way of knowing, how does it affect me?... It’s just a lot of questions... It’s leading me to just being very curious. And actually, what I’m more curious about are my in-laws, as people and as my new family. Because this is a very central part of their lives. So I guess it’s really just a beginning of trying to understand, who they are, who I am, what is this religion that’s the fastest growing religion in the world? And so even though I’m kind of on the outside of it, but I’m kind of not, I’m somewhere in between... It also makes me wonder, I feel respected by my in-laws, in that larger community, like meeting all of these extended family... I came away from that weekend wondering how I was perceived. You see people coming up and, of course they’re all speaking Arabic with each other, and kissing each other on the cheeks, really engaging with each other. And then coming up to me and going, “Hi how are you doing?” And then moving on to the next person. What assumptions are they making about me, what assumptions am I making about them?... That was a bit of a surprise there. I was going to draw a circle... But then a little tail kind of went off, and so I developed the tail a little bit and at first it reminded me of a seed, a sprouting seed. But then I also thought about a sperm inside an egg. So an ovum, I guess it would be... It’s all part of the same picture. It all developed as one piece.”
Dahlia

Dahlia is a 29-year old film production coordinator and documentary filmmaker who holds a master’s degree in Journalism. She was born in southern Africa to parents of African and Caribbean heritage, and went to school in Canada after moving here as a child. She converted 11 years before we met, and identifies most closely with a “Sufi outlook” and information sources that align with this perspective and which leave “room for debate and interpretation.” Dahlia explained her timeline drawing as follows:

“This is kind of the state I am now. Where it’s just a lot of, I guess confusion. I think the last I spoke about how I find that there’s kind of a sense, this ideological clash, between living in a western society that promotes a certain set of values and a certain way of thinking. Versus what I’ve been taught of Islam, or what I understand it to be. And so that’s kind of my state of mind, where it’s like all these different things, clashing. In particular, say things like feminism – western feminism – versus Islam, orthodox traditional Islam. And their conception of gender and sexuality, and then the Islamic understanding of those things. And then everything else, like the media, and everyone else that’s talking. Which is kind of in opposition to what I know about the faith… It’s like my husband, and then, me… My husband and I guess the decision to get married, he’s like the centre of my life… And that’s me, after converting. And that’s me again… Various journeys I took because of converting. Like, to [northeast African country], and I
went to [Middle Eastern country] and [Middle Eastern country], I was studying Arabic there. And in [northeast African country] as well… A lot of the times when I get bogged down in this, like the world of experience, I lose sight of like the point of it all, and sometimes when I see the cosmos, or the planets, or mountains or oceans or nature, it just kind of re-centres me. And I don’t often stop and look at the stars, but I think that if I were to, the truth would be a lot more apparent. Rather than just getting bogged down in all of this. And even in the Quran it says, nature, the rotation of the planets, and different things in them, the truth is there for those who see. I’m basically paraphrasing it poorly, but the truth is apparent in nature and all of these things, and plants and animals. So, that’s kind of what the stars represent, that kind of the natural world, and the cosmos… The truth is beyond my grasp sometimes. So it’s kind of there in the clouds, you’ll notice it’s kind of submerged in the world, only that much of it is submerged in the world of experience, while most of it’s out there, right. I can’t always grasp it. If I just stopped for a moment, I could maybe see it.”

Abdullah

Abdullah is a 30-year-old law student. His Muslim father moved to Canada from the Middle East before Abdullah was born to complete his master’s degree, and his Roman Catholic mother is a second or third generation Canadian from the rural Prairies. Abdullah grew up in northern and western Canada, and pursued Muslim Studies in the Middle East, where he learned Arabic and studied Ja’fari jurisprudence (a school of law within Shia Islam) before starting law school. Although Abdullah studied to be an imam – a term which translates to faith leader, but can also apply to advisor roles in the community – he tries to be as “non-partisan” as possible and is not a rigid follower of any one school of thought. When Abdullah was 13, he visited his father’s home country and stayed with his Muslim uncle for four months. While Abdullah was there, his uncle brought him to Friday prayers and would subtly talk about God by mentioning things such as, “look at the beauty of the trees.” By the end of the summer, Abdullah “felt more comfortable” with Muslim theology than with Christian doctrine (especially the idea of the Trinity). When he arrived back in Canada, he initially pretended to be Christian to avoid upsetting his mother and then told her, “I’m Muslim.” At first, Abdullah said he did not practice as a “good Muslim – just beliefs.” But towards the end of high school and at the start of university, he became more devout. He credits this change partly due to being a “more reflective age,” and a formative period of making the transition to university. At the same time, Abdullah was disturbed by his friends’

31 Opted out of producing a timeline drawing during the follow-up interview.
lifestyles that centered around alcohol and drug use to try to avoid a gap in life “in terms of meaningfulness.” Years later, he acknowledges that he is still on a “spiritual journey,” which is “not a single moment.”

Ruqayyah

Ruqayyah is a 30-year-old Canadian woman of Caribbean descent and homeschool educator to her four children. After graduating from high school in the GTA, she started a bachelor’s degree with the aspiration to become a teacher, but withdrew from her studies during her first year, shortly after “accepting Islam,” to avoid accumulating student loans (since “Islam doesn’t permit interest”). Initially, Ruqayyah attended a local Salafi mosque, but eventually “drifted away” from it due to its literalist approach and intolerance for different opinions. Since then, she has not found a mosque that resonates with her, as most mosques in the GTA have congregations from particular cultural backgrounds and she feels that “as a Canadian, I was completely disconnected from that”. Ruqayyah also observed that “certain places don’t like kids,” which is a challenge
with primary caregiving responsibilities for her four young children. While she did not specify an affiliation to a particular school of thought or denomination and does not regularly worship at a mosque, Ruqayyah’s modest style (including wearing hijab and abaya) seems to indicate her adherence to some Sunni clothing guidelines. Ruqayyah described key points throughout her conversion experience with reference to her timeline drawing, as follows:

“I just put Islam as the focus. And the arrows go forward. So, I think my father is the number one factor that kind of led me because I mentioned to you last time, he wasn’t really helping. Like he was physically there. But when I realized he wasn’t really financially helping or he wasn’t emotionally there, that got me really sad. And then, 16 also comes to mind, in grade ten when I started working. And at school. And, I told you I was an honour student so I felt a lot of pressure to perform and I was just taking all the maths, all the sciences, all the languages. And working. And then my dad. So I felt like I was stuck in a routine. I do remember going to the doctor, but I was so young, he didn’t want to give me anti-depressants and I just didn’t feel like doing anything anymore. I kept doing my schoolwork and going to school and everything seemed fine. Outside people couldn’t tell. But I just wasn’t happy. So then at this point, I started reading the Bible. Which led to eventually other books but initially it was just the Bible because I was Christian and that’s all I knew. And I didn't really even know about Islam, and I wasn’t looking for something else. I just thought that I should gain more knowledge about the faith I was born into. And then, that time too was when I started speaking to more people. There was the Jehovah’s Witness man that started coming around. And friends at school. And then, from there, that’s when I accepted Islam, from the knowledge that I gained, and then, that’s just when I started to learn Arabic. So I could actually understand the Quran and not rely on translations. So I knew even the Bible at that point, I did want to learn Hebrew and Aramaic, because I knew that was the original language. So that obviously played into when I accepted Islam, learning the original language of Islam. Reading the Quran a lot, studying the Quran. And then, I guess after that, I have a family now, a new community has also happened and I just drew a picture of a hijab. And then, depression at that point, contentment at that.”

Ruqayyah’s husband

Ruqayyah’s husband is a 29-year-old university student, who decided to pursue his bachelor’s degree in Urban Planning after working in construction and retail for several years. He grew up in a city on the Arabian Peninsula, and met Ruqayyah in middle school after moving to the GTA. He recalled talking with her when they were teenagers about prayer, and that hearing Muslims’ “constant references to God, saying ‘God willing’, ‘that’s the blessing of God, Masha’Allah,’

32 Did not produce a timeline drawing, as it was not built into the research design for interviews with participants’ family members/partners.
‘inshallah’” in everyday conversations “caught her attention.” In addition to their conversations, Ruqayyah’s husband talked about a young South Asian man whose “character was just so gentle,” and who had “an influence on her perception of Muslims and what kind of people Islam could cultivate.” When it came to marking her official conversion, Ruqayyah’s husband recounted:

“I gave her shahadah on MSN. [laughs] … I remember that I used to tell her, you know, are you sure you want to do this? As opposed to, you know, you need to do this really quickly. I was like, trying to tell her, take your time and consider it… And she was very adamant about wanting to do it… And, you know, she typed in on the keyboard. [laughs] … I was just talking to her about her own conviction. I didn’t even have a detailed conversation as to what she would have to do. Just, ‘Are you sure that you believe there is no God but God’ and so on, right. ‘Are you sure that you believe that Jesus is not the son of God? Are you sure you believe that there is no Trinity?’ And ‘you’re willing to testify to that.’ And essentially to me, that’s what the shahadah is. It doesn’t follow to me that you’re already accepting everything else that you haven’t even understood yet. It just means that I believe the oneness of God. And that God has certain attributes. And that’s kind of what I was talking about.”

While he self-identifies as Muslim, Ruqayyah’s husband did not specify a particular denomination or theological stance. His comments reflected a similar interest in education to Ruqayyah’s, and he emphasized how being Muslim is a personal experience unconnected to institutions or culture. He remarked that he did not see any challenges or barriers to learning about Islam, but that there are probably “obstacles,” especially for “early converts” and that barriers to finding information are usually caused when people “lose their way.”

Rachel

Rachel is a 29-year-old doctoral student in political science who has lived in Toronto since starting her master’s program. She was raised Anglican, going to church every Sunday and singing in the choir. Rachel said that despite wanting to become a priest or a nun as a child and enjoying singing in the choir:

“As I got older, there were aspects of Christianity that really bothered me. And so I went away from it… There are certain things that are even very clearly written in the Bible that I find very oppressive… When I was longing for some sort of spirituality as I got older, I would go to churches and Christian spiritual sites and I didn’t feel a connection there…

33 Produced timeline drawing during follow-up interview, and agreed to include it in data analysis, but asked to exclude it from publications due to the sensitive and personal nature of the events depicted.
And, another thing that always bothered me was kind of like the iconoclasm of Jesus as this, almost God-like figure in Christianity. And kind of the ornate-ness of the churches.”

In high school, Rachel’s World Issues teacher recommended the book “Islam” by Karen Armstrong. She recalled how she felt joyful when reading about zakat and an alternative way to organize society compared with what she was used to seeing in Canada. After meeting Muslim friends during her undergraduate program and becoming involved with student activism, Rachel said her interest in Islam:

“Started with asking my friends, ‘How do you understand your own religion?’ And they were so happy to talk about it. They were also very very helpful for me, in starting to question a lot of that… These were all things that came together. There’s no one kind of trigger. It’s a combination of things over time that kind of led me to embrace Islam, or to question more about Islam, or to begin to pray, to go to the mosque.”

By the time we met, Rachel had been “praying and practicing” for just under a year and a half. In addition to reading the Quran and hadith, Rachel also has a passion for political philosophy, including the works of Hegel, Kant, and Marx. She emphasized the importance of continuing to research and learn, since converting to Islam is an entire “ontological shift” that changes your way of thinking.

Gender and Age Patterns

Out of the 13 Muslim converts who participated in my project, nine self-identified as women, and four self-identified as men. Eight participants self-identified as married at the time of fieldwork, while the others either self-identified as single or did not mention their relationship status. Four participants self-identified as parents, and two participants were pregnant (both expecting their first child) at the time of fieldwork. Given media coverage and literature on the influence of Muslim partners on deciding to embrace Islam (particularly the influence of male Muslims on their female partners, e.g., McGinty, 2007; Soutar, 2010; Stoica, 2011), I was surprised that only two participants (Liam and Ruqayyah) described their spouses having a direct impact on their choice to convert. In Liam’s case, his conversion had more to do with the influence of his wife’s parents than his wife in particular, who he characterized as “not practicing at all.” That said, Dahlia did acknowledge that her husband plays a prominent role in her ongoing spiritual development, stating that he often sends her articles and commentary on politics and
“Muslim issues in North America or the West” after reading them himself. She added that, “I see myself kind of growing with him in certain ways.”

For all participants, social interaction with Muslim friends and family members was a critical part of their decision to convert, and to continue to learn about their faith after they made their official declarations. In addition to informal conversations, three participants (Dahlia, Olivier, and Seif) explicitly discussed the importance of having a mentor, especially at the beginning of their conversion experience. Several women and men who participated in the project mentioned taking formal studies or attending religious education courses as a valuable part of continuing to learn about Islam. While many of these educational programs are segregated by gender, they tend to be open to women and men. The main limitation to accessing such programs is social class, due to the fees associated with registration and travel – especially for Arabic and Islamic studies courses that take place overseas. Without a larger sample and statistical analysis, it is difficult to identify a strong correlation between gender identity and specific strategies for looking for resources or the types of people upon which converts rely for information.

Participants, while all adults, skew young.34 Specifically, they were between the ages of 24 and 44, with 11 out of 13 participants under 40, and 6 out of 13 participants under 30. The two participants’ spouses who met me for brief interviews were 29 (Ruqayyah’s husband) and 31 (Olivier’s wife) years old. This age pattern is presumably due to my recruitment strategies, which relied on email, Facebook, and Twitter distribution via my social and professional networks and through “gatekeeper” organizations that cater primarily to university students and new Muslims. The age range of participants has impacted research findings, as conversion is also intimately tied to identity formation overall (or, as Hermione described, “growing as an adult”). Future research is needed on the information experiences of converts over 45 and under 18.

Considerations of the ways in which education levels are tied to recruitment techniques and how academic degrees relate to information practices are explored in Chapters Six and Seven.

34 The 2016 Environics survey of 600 Canadian Muslims found that young Muslims (defined as ages 18 to 34) are more attached to their religious identity than their older counterparts (Environics, 2016). Additionally, 61% of young Muslim respondents “felt that being Muslim was most important, compared to six per cent who said being Canadian counted the most” (Grenier, 2016).
Chapter 6
Navigation

Chapter Overview

This chapter is centered around the theme of navigation. LIS and information technology literature refers to navigation in contexts such as providing health information resources to patients in clinical settings, and enhancing the accessibility and usability of libraries’ websites and interface design (Nix et al., 2016; Nganji, 2015; Chow et al., 2014). Ethnographer Edwin Hutchins’ analyses of Micronesian and modern Western ship navigation practices highlight the ways in which cultural systems inform individual actions and cognition (Hutchins, 2013, 1995; Hutchins & Hinton, 1984). Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered newsletters and promotional materials from Islamic education, outreach and spiritual care organizations that invoked navigational terms such as compass, beacon, road map, path, and journey. While most participants described their conversions as spiritual experiences, they also identified instances of decision-making in which information played an integral role. They came to know Islam through sacred texts, devoted friends, and religious leaders; they also had to learn to navigate systems and networks that led them to these resources. The next chapter will address the strategies that participants employed to assess the trust, credibility and authenticity of texts, scholars and religious leaders. This chapter introduces these interrelated strategies by focusing on participants’ experiences of obstacles encountered while looking for information (e.g., information overload, media discourses, avoiding and concealing information sources, and Islamophobic attitudes and actions), and the guides that offered advice and support along the way (e.g., chaplains, friends, convert care organizations). It also considers rhetorical devices such as metaphors used in participants’ narratives (e.g., straight path, spiritual journey) that reflect how participants invoke theological concepts learned through their social engagement with Muslim communities and peers to find their place within these spaces and align their personal experiences within an Islamic framework.
Serendipitous discovery features prominently in religious information practices. Several participants spoke of how “Islam came to me,” “Islam found me,” or how they encountered sources of information serendipitously. For instance, Olivier described the following experience:

“I was staying at my father’s place, and, back then, while I self-identified as Christian, I was looking for a Bible in his house, and I couldn’t find one. But he had a Quran. Which, in hindsight, was for me… I guess I see it as a bit of a sign.”

Relating to a short story I shared about an unexpected emotional experience that I had while visiting the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, January remarked:

“I’m trying to learn all this hermeneutics stuff, so I’m just thinking Gadamer would say, it was the question that found you, it was the moment that found you!... Which is kind of like my experience with conversion, too, to a certain degree. It just kind of came upon me… And I feel like… a lot of religious stuff is not very premeditative.”

These excerpts bring to light a thread of serendipity that ran through other anecdotes about finding verses in the *Quran* and *hadith* that spoke directly to what participants were going through at that moment in time. (For instance, Rachel commented on how she “came across” a *hadith* while reading, rather than actively seeking an explanation for the death of her close friend. For Rachel, this serendipitous moment of finding a scriptural passage that directly spoke to her experience offered comfort at a difficult time.) This rhetorical pattern is at least partly shaped by theological discourses about “fitra” – the idea that every person is born Muslim, in their original state – and how God’s plans are unpredictable and beyond what humans can understand or imagine on their own. Such statements may also be a conscious or unconscious effort to align personal narratives about conversion with accepted Islamic concepts. In particular, a belief in signs helps to validate experiences that could otherwise be considered as purely coincidental, giving meaning to seemingly banal events such as coming across a tweet, finding a *Quran* on a parent’s bookshelf, or chancing upon a *hadith* in a moment of doubt or internal conflict.

The idea of not actively searching for religion but encountering it by chance echoes findings about religious and cultural factors affecting everyday information behaviour – specifically, how it is characterized by limited active information seeking and a tendency towards trusting interpersonal information sources (Gaston et al., 2015). It also reflects elements of “information
encountering” theory, which moved away from the traditional emphasis on purposive information behaviour, towards a focus on how people find information in accidental, incidental, or serendipitous ways (Erdelez, 1999). Sanda Erdelez’s theory accounts for chance in navigating information systems, and shares this concern with work carried out by LIS contemporaries on leisure reading practices (Ross, 1999) and an ecological model of information acquisition and use (Williamson, 1998). More recently, information researchers have applied the idea of serendipitous encounters to digital platforms such as blogs (Rubin et al., 2011). As information behaviour scholar Donald Case writes, “information often comes to us, fortuitously, in the course of our normal lives. The serendipity factor – the seemingly accidental discovery of relevant information – operates more often than we might expect” (2012, p. 37, italics in original). Whether it is everyday serendipitous connections with friends, other converts, and chaplains, or profound changes for people who “never expected to convert” and were not searching for religion, the important role of serendipity in participants’ experiences must not be overlooked. Not only have participants found informative and evocative resources serendipitously, but it is also noteworthy that they have acknowledged the value of such serendipity as part of their conversion experiences.

2   Accessibility

Although serendipity may be part of finding relevant resources, another important navigational aspect of Muslim converts’ experiences has to do with accessibility: What information is available? How do post-9/11 geopolitical interests factor into online content? What happens when you find the “right” mosque or Islamic learning centre for you, but it is a two-hour bus ride from your home? What if that informative course your Muslim friend recommended costs hundreds of dollars and you are on a student budget? The following section highlights how participants described their experiences with, and responses to, these kinds of situations.
2.1 Historical and temporal dimensions

Participants’ experiences of converting to Islam are backdropped with a post-9/11 world. As Seif pointed out when he described how his initial interest in Islam was sparked by his interest in Middle Eastern history and politics, “because we live in a post-9/11 era… if you want to learn about the world, you have to look at those sort of topics.” Liam, while he admitted that he does not actively practice Islam, described his experience as follows:

“9/11 was a moment for me when I started becoming curious about Islam and extremism... I just wanted to know more… what is this about, and I’m sure not everyone who’s Islamic is an extremist… I just wanted to educate myself.”

For Seif and Liam, their awareness of current events and global issues drew them towards learning more about Islam. As Henry Kim, the Director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum, noted, since September 11, 2001, North Americans have been exposed to “more information” about Islam, but also to “more bad information, which impacts how people think about Islam” (Kim, 2015). The historical period during which participants first learned about Islam marks their conversion experiences. Research on the experiences of North American Muslims in a post-9/11 social landscape has identified shared perceptions about increased or reinforced negative stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs in press coverage and government policies (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Kumar, 2010; Salaita, 2005; Sun et al., 2011). Yet, such research also sheds light on how this kind of coverage can provoke critical reflections and curiosity about Islam among both Muslims and non-Muslims (Peek, 2005). Indeed, Liam’s and Seif’s experiences suggest that an awareness of negative stereotypes and stigma towards Islam and Muslims encouraged them to ask questions about this faith tradition, to be more sensitive and empathetic towards believers, and to eventually identify as Muslims themselves.

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35 According to the Environics survey, “the angst of 9/11 has faded but public concerns about the cultural integration of immigrants are growing, and Muslims continue to be viewed with discomfort, if not suspicion, by some” (Environics, 2016, p. 1). As reported by CBC News, legal scholar Azeezah Kanji remarked, “‘being a securitized population under suspicion in Canada is really the dominant experience that we’ve had’ and Calgary business consultant Rahamatullah Siddique noted, ‘we see certain extremist groups associating their acts with our religion… that’s really created a stigma’” (Nasser, 2016).
A wealth of information about Islam, which was not historically accessible, is now available online. Depending on when participants marked their conversion, their access to relevant resources varied. For example, Dahlia recalled that when she converted in 2004, “I don’t think the web was a huge thing at that point for religious learning.” Abdullah laughed as he shared a nostalgic anecdote about how he used to borrow VHS tapes of popular Muslim scholars and motivational speakers from his local mosque’s library as a teenager, and how these videos initially exposed him to English speakers talking about Islam in an “intelligible” way. (Up to that point, Abdullah’s access to Islamic information rested almost entirely on his visit to his father’s native country in the Middle East.) Abdullah commented on how that mosque’s library is now defunct, speculating that this is likely because no one borrows videos anymore and so much information about Islam has gone online. Other participants also shared their experiences of converting before 9/11. For example, January described her conversion happening “when I was 12 years old” while she was living in South Asia. She recalled that when she returned to Canada, with the exception of the occasional person who would “say mean things like, ‘Look what your brothers did on September 11’… For the most part, people didn’t even really understand what it was.” Jennifer provided another perspective, contrasting the formal religious education she received from non-Muslim, orientalist scholars in Europe, with starting to find works by Muslim scholars “like Kecia Ali and Khaled Abou el Fadl and Amina Wadud” when she moved to Canada in 2001.36

There is also a generational impact on information access. For instance, Hermione noted that many of the resources available to Muslim converts are catered to youth – in terms of content and distribution channels (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, blogs). Abdullah discussed the challenges brought about by the prevalent expectation among youth that they can instantly connect with and understand information posted online:

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“In the past, if I were giving khutbah… and I quote something… that’s fine. Now, I can quote a verse or hadith and people will look it up on their phone while I’m quoting it, and look up where did I get it, and who else has spoken about it and what have they said about it.”

Abdullah said that while he appreciates this active engagement, it can make it difficult to communicate. He went on to explain:

“I was born and raised at a time when there wasn’t really internet… and we didn’t have smartphones… Whereas my brothers, they’ve been raised at a time when… it’s always kind of been the case for them, that the internet has been there… it’s been quite challenging with regards to how we communicate with one another, our norms.”

In contrast with his brothers who are part of a younger, “digitally native” demographic, Abdullah grew up without having access to online media, instant messaging, and the social expectations around being able to find answers to all questions on the internet and being constantly available to chat with friends and coworkers via mobile devices. Abdullah added that compared with his own experience of converting before mobile phones and social media were status quo, young people converting to Islam in North America today are potentially more vulnerable to extremist groups who recruit through these platforms. In Abdullah’s words, when he was a teenager, “there was no YouTube… They didn’t have access to us, and I had no access to Islamic information.” Abdullah’s comments draw attention to how access to Islamic sources presents a potential problem in that non-Muslims and converts may not be able to discern between information published on mainstream sites versus sites hosted by groups with radicalized agendas. Furthermore, the internet facilitates instant communication across borders, which removes barriers that once made it more difficult for extremists to connect with young people in various parts of the world.

While these kinds of challenges are presented by intergenerational communication, making friends with Muslims from other age groups can also offer insights about what it is like to be a Muslim in Canada at different points in history. As January explained:

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The term “digital natives” is attributed to Marc Prensky’s article, which proposes that the “first generations” of students to “grow up” with digital technology can be designated as “Digital Natives” in that they are “‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). The debate over whether “digital natives” have different learning preferences and technological skills continues (see, e.g., Bennett et al., 2008; Margaryan et al., 2011; Bennett & Maton, 2010).
“What was it like being a Muslim in Canada in the 1980s and 1970s?... Going to the mosque was a very different experience than now… That affects the way I worship, and I identify my conceptions of what community means.”

An awareness of history is important because different historical periods shape the ways in which Muslim converts find and use worship spaces, access information, and interact with communications media throughout their processes of conversion. The excerpts above raise the question: Does increased access to the internet improve access to relevant information related to Islam, or does it merely present a more complex system to navigate? Are decisions about the relevance of sources made independently, or in consultation with others? Furthermore, how does Arabic fluency affect access to reliable information and the ability to present oneself as a Muslim in certain communities? The next two chapters on authority and self-expression will return to these questions.

### 2.2 Proximity and internal divides

Conversion to Islam in the GTA is characterized by a lack of downtown infrastructure for converts, and cultural divisions among existing mosques. Participants commented on their frustration about the scarce resources available for converts in the downtown core, and difficulties finding an appropriate mosque community when you do not self-identify as a member of the ethnic group with which a local mosque brands itself. While the GTA is generally a place where freedom of religious expression is embraced and is home to the largest Muslim population in Canada, there is a significant learning curve to navigating the variety of Muslim communities in the area. Mobile apps can prove to be a helpful navigational tool. For instance, Hermione described an app she uses “where you can see nearby mosques… and which sect is predominantly present at that mosque.” This experience echoes research about pilgrims who walked the Camino de Santiago, which found that mobile apps can enrich spiritual journeys by helping pilgrims find relevant local sites and services quickly and easily, connect to family and peers, receive personalized recommendations, and “feel more informative” (Antunes & Amaro, 2016, p. 512).

Yet even with the assistance of mobile apps, geographic proximity can be a major issue – especially for those without their own vehicle. As Alexandra pointed out:
“The GTA is big… If I don’t have transport, I can’t go to this event… Maybe I would love to go visit this particular mosque, but it’s in Mississauga [city west of Toronto]. So it doesn’t matter how beautiful and amazing it is… It’s too far.”

Hermione shared her similar disappointment about inaccessible programs that are intended to cater to the needs of Muslim converts. She recalled that she had to miss a Ramadan event hosted by an MSA outside of Toronto: “I was even going to drive, but it still would have taken me like, two hours to get there.”

For Muslim converts who have lived in other places, the issues of geographic access and navigating complex layers of ethnic and sectarian divisions that present themselves in the GTA are readily apparent points of comparison. For example, Hermione admitted that she experiences more hostility toward her Shia leanings from Muslim peers in the GTA:

“I still don’t have the same thing I had in [western European city where she attended university]… my best friends were Sunni, Sufi, and Shia. But then when I came here, it was a bit different… I was like, why is it so Sunni focused?”

Despite these sectarian divides, Muslim communities in the GTA are less fragmented by official (i.e. state) languages than in other parts of Canada. As Alexandra observed: “It’s just ethnicities and home language, but at least everyone can speak English, more or less.” From Alexandra’s perspective, although mosques and Muslim organizations are spread out over a wider area, the GTA is less complicated to navigate than the city where she attended college, since there are fewer linguistic divisions between Muslim communities. This observation suggests that geographical access has to do with more than proximity to mosques alone; it also involves access to welcoming and safe spaces to explore different theological perspectives and whether knowledge of a particular language is a prerequisite for attending and joining a local congregation.

When educational programs about Islam are available and open to Muslims with a variety of linguistic, ethnic, and sectarian identities, they tend to be aimed at a younger audience. As Kelly explained:

“A lot of these [religious education] classes are for children… So do they accommodate people who are coming into Islam a little bit older?... The ones that do, they’re probably not running anymore because not enough people are there. It’s just all these things that just can get in the way.”
Kelly’s comments point to how the combination of a lack of programs catering to the needs of adult converts and inconsistent enrollment that has a direct effect on course offerings are obstacles that complicate the ability to navigate the system of Muslim communities in the GTA.

2.3 Transnational influence

Even as they are based in the GTA, Muslim converts’ experiences of identity formation are affected by a broader geopolitical context and transnational influences. Dahlia described the nuances of global influences as follows:

“From immigrants who come here from Islamic countries, but as well, a new indigenous Islam that’s growing, and an Islam that’s also being imported from the United States through African-Americans who kind of brought the tradition through Malcolm X... And then, other indigenous Islamic movements through converts who have such a profound impact on Islam in the west... That’s a good thing. But at the same time... it means your influences are many and your confusion is great.”

Dahlia’s description of what she referred to as the “cosmopolitan” nature of her own influences suggests that while a multicultural metropolis such as the GTA provides opportunities to connect with various Islamic perspectives, the multiplicity of voices and traditions can also present a confusing landscape to navigate. The diversity among the ummah broadly and in the GTA in particular can also present a problem in terms of the “crisis of authority” in Islam (an issue which will be examined more closely in the next chapter). Indeed, the theological, ethnic, and racial diversity among GTA Muslims can be intimidating for new Muslims. As Seif explained:

“There are so many groups that you don’t know where to go. Where it’s like, there’s a dozen forks in the road, you don’t know what to do, you don’t have any street signs or anybody pointing you to the right direction.”

Seif’s navigational metaphors evoke the potentially overwhelming challenges that Muslim converts face in the GTA. While he did not personally relate to tremendous difficulties in learning about his religion, he was careful to not dismiss the experiences of others.

One of the ways in which global influences appear is through mosque building and renovation projects. For instance, Alexandra described the competing political interests in mosques based in her home country in eastern Europe, and the balance that one imam was able to maintain by
making strategic decisions about funding sources to support building renovations. Rather than accepting funds from Saudi Arabia which were contingent on relinquishing control over how the mosque was run, the imam approached a Turkish organization. In Alexandra’s words, this organization:

“Built their minaret, and tiled their walls in blue tiles… and he still gets to keep his little madrasa… and he can do his khutbahs the way he wants. No one’s telling him what to say and what to preach.”

Although this example applies to a different geographical context than the GTA, it demonstrates the ties that bind Muslim communities around the world. With so much information about Islam available online and with religious education occurring increasingly outside of traditional institutions, the political agendas of content providers, Muslim scholars, and religious leaders are an additional “bump in the road” to find one’s way around. Whether matters of transnational influences, accessing physical spaces or way-finding through online ones, geographical dimensions of conversion experiences cannot be overlooked.
2.4 Socioeconomic access

Navigating the process of converting to Islam and the network of Muslim communities in the GTA is further complicated by socioeconomic factors. Ideas about the relationship between class and access to information have been addressed by LIS scholars such as Elfreda Chatman, who conducted a series of ethnographic studies about information seeking among marginalized populations in the 1990s. In particular, Chatman’s work on information poverty and normative behaviour in “small world” settings (such as janitorial staff at an American university, retired women, and female prison inmates) drew attention to how active information seeking beyond immediate, familiar social circles is rare among groups who perceive information sources outside of their “small worlds” as irrelevant to their daily, practical concerns and situations (Chatman, 1990; Chatman, 1992; Chatman, 1999). More recently, LIS scholars have investigated how systemic barriers such as geographical location and class have a direct impact on the “digital divide” and ICT diffusion (Ayanso et al., 2014; Haight et al., 2014). While these studies do not focus on religious contexts, they remind researchers to acknowledge the connection between socioeconomic mobility and information access.

Although religious education and spiritual care made available to students through university chaplaincies and student associations are often affordable during the academic year, programs offered during winter and spring breaks and over the summer tend to be expensive off-campus retreats and conferences. For Muslim converts who are not students, the variety and affordability of relevant programming is even more limited. For example, Aisha flew halfway across the country to take a course on women’s fiqh because she was unavailable when the course was offered in her home city. She told me about how she was thankful to be able to take this course, but also aware that her social status enables her to travel and pursue her religious education outside of the GTA. As Aisha explained: “I’m in a position where I’m fortunate. I can afford to fly myself to [western Canadian city] to take this course… And so, what if you

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38 See also Jaeger & Burnett, 2005 about the impact of post-9/11 U.S. policy developments on open access to and free exchange of information related to political issues.

39 As described by Afghan Islamic scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali, fiqh literally refers to “knowledge or understanding especially of that which is not self-evident and requires a certain degree of intellectual exertion to comprehend” (Kamali, 1996, p. 62). Kamali goes on to state that the “revealed sources of shari’ah, namely the Qur’an and Sunnah, provide the basic evidence from which the rules of fiqh are deduced through the application of juristic reasoning and ijtihad” (ibid.).
Aisha’s graduate studies focus on social justice issues, so it is not surprising that she is sensitized to the ways in which class and privilege impact literacies.

The above example raises a critical systemic issue related to access: namely, that many participants first encountered Muslim communities and resources during their post-secondary education, which is available to those with the financial means to pay for tuition, textbooks, and everyday living expenses. For instance, Rachel described how it was through two of her university residence floor mates that she “ended up learning a lot about Islam,” and Seif explained that it was through his involvement in his university’s student union that he initially met and became friends with Muslim students. Similarly, Alexandra said, “I don't think I had any specific contact with Islam until encountering my group of friends at college.” Alexandra, Seif, and Rachel highlight how attending post-secondary institutions can serve as a gateway to meeting Muslims and learning about Islam. Without the opportunity to go to college or university, these participants would have presumably found Islam through other ways, and may not have been interested in converting at all.

In addition to the issues of accessing post-secondary education and the religious courses and spiritual care programs offered through colleges and universities, translated books (such as tafsirs of the Quran) can be difficult to find in Canada and tend to be expensive. While the financial burden of printed translations should not be dismissed, it is important to note that it is no longer necessary to rely entirely on formal education or print materials to learn about Islam, as Muslim scholars are increasingly posting content online. During our interviews, Alexandra commented that since classes are frequently held in suburbs outside Toronto and take hours to get to by public transportation, she often prefers to listen to lectures online during her spare time. Still, not all online content is available for free, and internet access requires infrastructure and recurring fees (especially for those streaming video lectures and podcasts from their homes).

These excerpts draw attention to how socioeconomic factors (including the costs associated with accessing resources) are directly implicated in how Muslim converts look for, assess, and understand information about Islam throughout their conversion processes. Although issues of
privilege and the financial costs of learning about Islam as a newcomer to the religion were not discussed in every interview or field outing, it is clear that socioeconomic factors influence the degree to which courses, retreats, books, and mosques are accessible to Muslim converts in the GTA. Because most participants in my project completed at least one post-secondary degree, more research is needed on the information needs and practices of Muslim converts from other socioeconomic backgrounds.

3 Reading as a guide

Navigation occurs not merely through the systems and spaces described above, but also through the texts that provide a basis for beliefs. In his review of 31 refereed works that explore the intersections of information and spirituality, Jarkko Kari argues that spirituality “cannot be founded on one predetermined ‘holy text,’ but on various sources among the vast array of documents and beings that are available” (2007, p. 937). Indeed, Kari suggests that “spiritual information” often appears as documents such as doctrines, scriptures, personal papers about spiritual experiences, sound recordings, records related to rituals and services, and tarot cards (Kari, 2007).

In an article on religious reading in Christianity and Islam, the authors discuss how reading can be transformative for a person’s religious beliefs and self-understanding (Vamanu & Guzik, 2015). While not focused exclusively on religious reading, a study of Afghan newcomer youth in Toronto highlights reading as a leisurely activity and a means of learning about Islam (Quirke, 2014, pp. 83-86). LIS scholars researching non-religious contexts and populations (including Russian-speaking immigrants, young adolescents, librarians, and first-year university students) also articulate the ways in which reading is instrumental to identity formation (Dali, 2013; Howard, 2011; Julien & Genuis, 2011; Stewart, 2012).

One type of reading – whether in print, online, or in audiovisual forms – that is prominent among Muslim converts is news coverage about Islam and extremism. “Reading” the news piqued several participants’ curiosity about Islam, which eventually led them to educate themselves and form new perspectives. As Seif mentioned, the media plays a critical role in informing and

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40 While spiritual information can manifest in documentary forms, Kari also acknowledges its non-documentary varieties such as intuition, dreams, and messages from perceived paranormal and supernatural sources such as spirits and extraterrestrial beings (Kari, 2001, pp. 22–5).
“forming our ideas and collective conversations.” January talked about being “drawn to reading about” Islam as a preteen after listening to her friend’s mother’s Islamophobic comments, which she speculates were based on “what she saw in Maclean’s or whatever”. Whether their interest in Islam was sparked by others’ opinions or by the news directly, mainstream media is one of the key texts with which Muslim converts contend.\(^{41}\)

Another medium through which Muslim converts initially receive information about Islam is printed books and scholarly articles. For example, Dahlia recalled that when her conversion process began in 2004, whether it was “scholarly sources or people who were commenting on the scholarly sources,” she learned “mainly through physical texts” such as the *Quran* and *hadith*. Ruqayyah’s initial exposure to sacred narratives was through reading the new and old testaments, “which led to eventually other books.” Ruqayyah’s husband commented that he interpreted Ruqayyah’s conversion as being composed of multiple stages, the first of which was characterized by having the Bible and *Quran* as the “only references beyond conversation” to reflect on “theological arguments against the trinity and the nature of Jesus.” For others, reading books on religion was where they claimed that their conversion process started. Dahlia remarked, “I decided that looking into different faiths was an important way for me to find a life path. And so I looked into Buddhism, like a lot of people in the West do.” Aisha, while drawn to Islam through her Muslim friends, told me that reading about other religions affirmed her decision to convert to Islam. As she described:

> “What kept on happening is I would get halfway through a book and go – in the case of Buddhism – I read it and went, this is an amazing way of life, and I love that it speaks to values of compassion, but this can augment any religion… And then I started reading a bit more about Christianity…”

Aisha explained that reading about other religions ultimately led her to a book by Maurice Bucaille, in which the author compares scientific findings to the Bible and the *Quran*. She said that the section on science and the *Quran* made “perfect sense” and that “reading about that was absolutely huge for me in terms of the signs that were there.” Although Aisha did not credit

\(^{41}\) The motivation to learn more about Islam after following current events in the news, and to gain a deeper sense of religious identity, has been addressed elsewhere (e.g., Quirke, 2014, pp. 86–7).
reading books on religion with being the only influence on her conversion, she claimed that “going through the learning phase… was an integral part” of her “journey.”

Some participants reflected on how these initial readings marked the beginning of their conversions. Others spoke about their process of learning about Islam and becoming confident in their Muslim identities as constant and continuous. They envisioned futures of always having books to read, languages to acquire, and scholarly works to become familiar with. As Hermione suggested, “There’s so much information that you can learn from, whether it’s spiritual, practical, or social or economic aspects… I can’t even imagine a day where I wouldn’t be always looking for more information.” This notion of continuous learning echoes theories of “continuous conversion,” which suggest that even religious adherents who appear self-assured and knowledgeable about their faith make ongoing efforts to affirm their religious selves through proselytization, teaching, critique, and other activities (Coleman, 2003). As religious studies scholar Kathleen M. Moore writes in her chapter on dawah in the United States:

“According to most accounts [of Muslim conversion], there was no dramatic turning point and, although other Muslims are an important source of inspiration, many converts relate that they were convinced by reading books, especially the Qur’an. Notably, however, many converts say that they began to learn more about the religion only after they had embraced Islam” (Moore, 2014, p. 281).

Several participants alluded to how their conversion is an ongoing “spiritual journey,” and commented on how difficult it is to define a precise moment of conversion since it cannot be tied to one particular, bounded instance. Rachel told me that she had done a lot of research before converting about a year and a half before we met, and continues to research and learn, since converting to Islam is an entire “ontological shift” that changes your way of thinking about things. This process of continuously learning from texts is one that is theologically sanctioned. As one of the participants at the convert discussion group I attended explained, Islam advocates for seeking knowledge so it is important to constantly learn as much as possible. At another religious education class, one of the students asserted that, “learning our deen is a lifelong process that can be very personal.”

Kelly also described her conversion as “a journey” and

\[42\] Deen refers to “Islamic way of life” (Galonnier & de los Rios, 2016, p. 70).
remarked that “Islam is very aware of that, in terms of its teachings… This is not going to happen overnight… it’s slow, but it’s meaningful.” Similarly, Olivier stressed that he is “still learning, still beginning,” and Seif commented about how “learning lasts the rest of your life.” Abdullah, a graduate student who often gives khutbah and leads religious education workshops at local mosques and universities, talked about how “learning is a lifelong journey and knowledge doesn’t cease.” Although reading is only part of the learning process, all participants noted that it is a central one.

In addition to helping converts learn about Islamic teachings, reading can also produce spiritual rewards. For example, Jennifer described deriving “spiritual pleasure” and being spiritually “uplifted” from the books and articles that she reads. (Notably, many of the texts that Jennifer reads are academic in nature and are not written strictly for a religious audience with any intention of facilitating the reader’s spiritual enlightenment.) Abdullah recalled that when he was visiting his uncle in the Middle East as a 13-year-old, his uncle would bring him to Friday prayers. Since he could not understand the sermons or rituals, Abdullah would bring books from his uncle’s home library to read – scientific textbooks, computer books, and English translations of Bukhari and the Quran. By the end of the summer, Abdullah said that he “felt very fulfilled spiritually.” Hermione also described how reading the Quran was instrumental in her decision to convert to Islam. As she recalled: “I think when it was ten days of Ramadan left, I opened the Quran, I started reading the first page, and it immediately had me. And I was like, okay, now I actually believe in this.” Ruqayyah, speaking about her book club with other mothers who homeschool their children, said that fiction “always helps me with my spirituality more. Because it helps you with empathy, you know. That’s very essential to your faith.” For Ruqayyah, works of fiction (including And the Mountains Echoed and The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini, The Jade Peony by Wayson Choy) and memoirs (such as The Good Daughter by Jasmin Darznik, The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls) – in addition to sacred texts – support her spirituality.

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43 Public sermon presented at the Friday congregational prayer and Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.
These excerpts indicate that reading is not merely about educating yourself about Islam; it is also a way of receiving spiritual revelations and practicing your faith.44

The idea that reading can be a spiritual experience is reflected in research on John Wesley’s life, in which the author describes reading and annotating sacred texts and doctrinal documents as a spiritual literacy practice (Tolar Burton, 2008). Others have remarked on how reading fiction can serve as a profound, transformative experience for the reader (Kari & Hartel, 2007, p. 1137; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002). Specifically, “invented stories” (Kari & Hartel, 2007, p. 1137) – what Library and Information Science researchers Bob Usherwood and Jackie Toyne refer to as “imaginative literature” (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002, p. 38) – allows readers to develop their sense of self and belonging by relating to characters’ emotions and experiences, acquiring new perspectives on their own situations, and developing their understanding of their communities (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002, pp. 38-39). A more explicitly religious example of the significance of reading narratives is Rebekka King’s ethnographic research on progressive and mainline Christian congregations in Canada, in which the Religious Studies scholar observes how reading and discussing impressions and interpretations of previously unfamiliar material (e.g. works of popular theology and scholarly biblical criticism) can challenge and change a person’s understanding of what their religion is and what it could be – even if that information had been publicly available for years (King, 2012, pp. 186-223). Furthermore, this collaborative, “socially embedded” exercise of reading and discussing “is often presented as the first step towards ‘becoming’ a progressive Christian” (King, 2012, p. 194) – that is, a technique to construct one’s identity.45

Documents serve as important spiritual guides along the path of conversion. One woman at a “sisters iftar” I attended talked about listening to CDs of Sira (biography of Muhammad), which allows her to learn on a more flexible schedule, as she is busy raising three pre-teens. Passages from translated versions of the Quran can also offer guidance on particular issues that Muslim converts are dealing with. As Rachel explained (in reference to a mobile app she has for the

44 Fuller makes a similar observation about the spiritual impact of texts that are not classified in a conventionally religious genre, stating that: “People find spiritual inspiration not just in sermons, but also in books and seminars about humanity’s creative potentials… even church members now self-consciously supplement their church’s teachings by ‘consuming’ books, articles, or lectures that are decidedly nontheological” (Fuller, 2001, p. 9).

Quran, which provides English translation and allows users to bookmark sections), “There were things that I read, and I read them at the time where I needed to read them. That were just very meaningful to me.” Guiding documents are not limited to the Quran and biographies. Reading lists drawn from recommendations by trusted and respected scholars can also be helpful guides. For instance, Seif compared these scholars’ reading lists to “a kind of map” – just as there are different countries, there are different subjects. He also used the example of Ibn al-Arabi reading Aristotelian ethics to explain cases of when “it wasn’t until I read this book that I understood that one.” Seif’s quotation illustrates how scholars’ hermeneutical directions can guide novices through a logical sequence of reading texts.

Even the act of bookmarking can be considered as a navigational information practice, a way of marking key places in the text. Olivier compared his approach to reading with that of his friends’ as follows:

“I see some books that friends have and they’re like, 20 bookmarks… and the post-its. And then there’s like, things scribbled onto the pages…. I don’t do that…. In the past, I always had this – long before I started on this journey – this approach kind of like, leave the book as untouched as possible. And then you can give it to someone else.”

Hermione’s description of highlighting “important passages” and annotating her paperback Quran is another example of reading as an active practice. These examples reflect similar activities to those identified in personal information management literature on bookmarking as a way-finding strategy (Chaudhry et al., 2015). They also point to the importance of annotation as an approach to enhance critical and active engagement with texts – an approach which has design implications for e-books and other materials available on digital platforms (Drucker, 2009; Hemminger & TerMaat, 2014; Jensen & Scharff, 2014; Lu & Deng, 2012). Finally, the act of highlighting and annotation serves as an index of religious commitment. Similar practices of indexing religious engagement though writing comments about scriptures, sermons and previous journal entries, and modifying standard prayers to suit individual needs and personalities have been observed in other traditions, such as among Catholics university students who keep spiritual journals (Siracky, 2013).
4 Avoiding and concealing

Information practices include not only information seeking and use (i.e. looking for resources and applying their messages to navigate and understand everyday situations), but also information avoidance and concealment. For instance, in her pilot study journal, Aisha noted how she avoids relying on the internet, as it contains a large volume of unreliable messages. In her words:

“Googling for information online can open up a can of worms and lead to a lot of harsh opinions and misinformation.”

Liam also talked about avoiding online searches about Islam-related content on his work computer due to how such searches might be perceived by government agencies who have access to search histories, especially within a workplace that he characterized as having a somewhat paranoid mindset already.

Kelly poignantly and courageously shared her experience of avoiding information. (She later decided not to continue as a participant in my project, but felt comfortable including excerpts from our conversation and indicated her interest in reading the aggregated findings.) Specifically, Kelly described how her transition into accepting Islam was made all the more confusing from trauma that was closely linked to her religious experience. While she found Islam to be a beautiful religion of peace that has guided her to live a humble life, her introduction to Islam (beyond growing up with Muslim parents and knowing some of the religion’s basic principles) was through a person who assaulted her. She told me about a period of time that followed this violation when she avoided prayer, fasting, and associating with Islam because it was difficult to separate the religion from this traumatic experience.

Another form of information avoidance is self-censorship and concealing details about one’s religious identity. For example, Hermione described hiding her Muslim identity from her parents, who emigrated from a Muslim country at a time when religious teachings and codes of conduct were being strictly imposed upon its citizens. By the time Hermione “came out” as a convert to her friends, she still felt the need to keep Islamic books, magazines, and articles away from her parents’ sight when they came to visit her at university. After graduating with a bachelor’s degree and starting a master’s degree, Hermione’s parents and younger sister moved
to a suburb outside Toronto and she moved in with them and told them that she has embraced Islam. Still, she explained:

“It’s hard enough for me to get out to Friday prayer… They’re [Hermione’s parents] like… ‘Are you studying?’… I can’t say that I’m going to learn more about Islam. I definitely can’t say I’m going to a Muslim event… I’m going to a mosque. That’s like, Oh! No! Like, tragedy.”

Although Hermione does not refrain from talking about her spirituality or issues related to Islam with her Muslim friends and classmates, and did not seem to be in favour of censorship generally, in order to simultaneously maintain her relationship with her parents and her religious identity as a convert, she sometimes withholds potentially damaging or controversial information. For example, Hermione talked about avoiding the news entirely when her parents and family friends are in the same room:46

“When the Ottawa shooting happened and everything, my parents started talking about it, and I was like, try not to say anything… I keep hoping that… we’re just going to stick to Netflix and they will never have to watch the news… Every time there’s something on the news… it just makes everything worse… With my family, or like family friends, I just have to sit through and listen to them pontificate about what’s happening in Iraq and Syria.”

Olivier also spoke about how although many of his friends and colleagues know that he is Muslim, he has not yet disclosed his relatively new religious affiliation with his parents and extended family. Similarly, Seif remarked that:

“To this day honestly my parents don’t know that I’m Muslim… right away you have to sort of hide it from your parents… It’d be sort of like, going home with like, green hair or something… It wouldn’t be right to tell them right away.”

These comments suggest that Muslim converts choose to hide their religious identities from their parents as a form of self-protection and relationship maintenance. Indeed, this choice often seems like the only viable option in order to be simultaneously Muslim and an accepted family member. This pattern of human information behaviour has been observed in other contexts, such as avoiding, denying, and ignoring uncomfortable, distressing, and threatening health information about parenting, cancer treatments, and genetic testing as a way of coping with fear of judgment and uncertainty (Loudon et al., 2016; Case et al., 2005; Zhang & Siminoff, 2003).

46 The example of avoiding the news aligns with existing research which has found that people may avoid “public information” such as mainstream media “for fear of bad news that would cause depression-like feelings” (Narayan et al., 2011).
Like the dinner party cliché of forbidding conversations about politics, religion, or money, information behaviour scholars have also acknowledged the tendency to deliberately ignore or passively avoid information about these topics – areas that are “closely connected to one’s world-view and values” (Narayan et al., 2011) – to maintain cordial relations and mitigate anxiety and tension (Narayan et al., 2011). While intended to protect oneself and one’s relationships with others, these behaviours may put the person at risk of “information poverty” – the condition of being devoid of helpful sources on account of “outsiders who withhold privileged access to information” (Chatman, 1996, p. 197), “self-protecting mechanisms due to a sense of mistrust regarding the interest or ability of others to provide useful information” (ibid.), and “a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits” (ibid.; see also Burnett & Jaeger, 2008; Loudon, 2013, p. 5).

Self-censorship, as outlined in information and health research and as described by Olivier and Hermione, contrasts with other examples about sharing information with friends and peer Muslims. Yet even converts who openly disclose their religious affiliation to their families, friends, and peers may decide to keep details about their conversion to themselves. As Rachel explained, “I feel like, no matter what, it’s going to be turned into a linear story… So I rarely, rarely, rarely talk about it.” Concealing information occurs in different situations and through various ways of communicating; in the above cases, between Muslim converts and their parents, family members, or among community members, and through evading certain topics in conversation or hiding reading materials.

One tool that can help conceal religious books, articles, and magazines from prying eyes is an e-reader. As Hermione explained:

“I relied a lot from the Quran, from my understanding of it. But I also started buying different books, on my Kindle, ‘cause I couldn’t have them, like, lying around, in case my parents were coming, asking like, ‘Why do you have so many books on Islam?’… So I just had them all on my Kindle.”

The Environics survey of Muslims in Canada reported that 17% of respondents – especially those who are Canadian-born (32%) and under the age of 35 (24%) – said they have “felt inhibited about expressing [their] opinions on social or political issues because of race, ethnicity or religion” (2016, p. 40). This survey finding echoes sentiments expressed by the
(predominantly young) Muslims with whom I spoke about withholding political opinions and avoiding discussions about religion entirely.

5 “Allowing your heart into it”

For the Muslim converts I talked to, learning about Islam and its place in the world is inherently linked to growing as a person. When the nature of human beings is understood to be holistic, it is impossible to divorce the cognitive, cultural, spiritual, social, and emotional components of the ongoing experience of conversion. Information is often conceptualized as the content that allows humans to build knowledge – typically appearing in the form of books, articles, websites, and other media objects. However, feelings, emotions, and intuition can also provide the foundation on which Muslim converts’ spirituality, religious identity, and understanding of Islam develops.

Kelly described the distinction she experienced between feeling in her heart that accepting her faith in Islam was right for her, and learning that logically, Islam “made sense.” Other participants similarly drew attention to the coexisting affective and analytical dimensions of embracing Islam. For instance, Aisha talked about an intuitive gravitation towards Islam, while acknowledging that attending formal religious education classes affirmed her understanding that Islam is, from her point of view, an inherently logical religion. In Aisha’s words, conversion to Islam is “a combination of what you feel, as well as your analytical brain and logical brain”.

Rachel also talked about her interest in Islam’s encouragement of seeking knowledge and the intellectual side of the religion, while being drawn to Islam for spiritual and emotional reasons that are difficult to articulate in words. Similarly, Dahlia spoke of her conversion as “a really deep intellectual process at the same time as being a spiritual one.” Seif explained his experience of witnessing the good moral character of his Muslim friends as follows:

“If you read a book and you’re convinced intellectually, that’s one thing… But human nature is affected in a significant – probably the most significant way – emotionally, by the character shown from other people. That’s how people change, that’s how people are touched… It just sort of grew on me.”

These descriptions indicate how information is mediated by other people – especially those deemed to be trusted, within one’s circle of close friends. Moreover, they reflect Kari and Hartel’s discussion of the “the profound” – “deep” and “sublime” information that allows humans to engage with “phenomena, experiences, or activities that transcend the daily grind”
(Kari & Hartel, 2007, pp. 1133, 1131). Seif’s comments also raise questions about the prevalent dualistic attitude in North American society that pits head against heart, such as: Are both affective and cognitive aspects necessary to embrace Islam? If both aspects are required for a person to convert, how can existing explanations of information practice be expanded? How can we separate the socio-culturally oriented concept of “information practice” from the more cognitively oriented concept of “information behaviour” if all dimensions of human experiences – including religious change – are so tightly interwoven? Intellectual, spiritual, emotional, embodied, social, cultural, and political dimensions of conversion experiences are not mutually exclusive. To accommodate a more inclusive understanding of conversion and other forms of critical life transitions, existing frameworks of information practice must be modified.

In response to a pilot study question about emotions experienced after interacting with people, organizations, and other resources for help and guidance, Alexandra wrote the following in her journal:

“I often feel enriched in my faith when learning more about it… and relieved and strengthened in my convictions when I find a comprehensive and sound Islamic response to any practices of social phenomena mistakenly/falsely attributed to Islam.”

Intuition also plays a role in participants’ conversion experiences – particularly, in times when intuition and emotions impact judgment. For instance, Alexandra noted the following: “It doesn’t matter how many credentials they have… if your heart is harsh… that’s something that I know instinctively. It’s something you emotionally know to be true.” Hermione recalled the following example about a popular politician who visited her previous university:

“I just really disliked him, because of the vibe that I got… Obviously I can’t know what [his] innermost intentions and feelings are. But if I get a strange vibe or whatever, if I think they’re being disrespectful towards something or someone… then, no, I wouldn’t trust them with most things.”

These quotations illustrate how trust and credibility assessments can be made on the basis of how another person’s character and opinions make you feel. This sense of intuition is built over time. As Aisha explained, reflecting on comments that her professor made during a course she took as part of her master’s program: “Your intuition is actually based on… many years… It actually isn’t just this like, mystical gut feeling… It actually comes from all these years of past experiences, things that have happened to you.” Aisha added that there is a connection between
intuition – the idea that a person can rely on their feelings about a situation (or another person) to understand how to respond to it, without engaging in a thorough process of logical reasoning – and the Islamic practice of praying istikhara⁴⁷. Relating her own example of preparing for her marriage, Aisha described the practice as follows:

“You pray istikhara… for making any decisions… What you basically say is that, if this is right, then make this happen easily… And if it’s not, then turn me away from it, and make me satisfied with what’s best for me… The answer actually comes to you in how you feel after you make that dua.”

Aisha also cited her experience of wearing hijab, recommending that for any woman who is considering wearing it, to “see how you feel when you’re wearing it” rather than making the decision based solely on a rational process alone. Intuition and emotions are resources that Muslim converts may draw upon to navigate the complex and multi-faceted experience of embracing Islam. The notion that emotions may perform an informational role (in that they help converts to make decisions in their daily lives) extends research on the affective dimensions of accessing, seeking, and interacting with information (Fourie & Julien, 2014; Fulton, 2009; Kuhlthau, 1991; Lopatovska, 2014; Mellon, 1986; Nahl & Bilal, 2007; Tinto & Ruthven, 2014). This notion also builds on work that focuses on “information experience,” which takes a phenomenological perspective to suggest that knowledge is produced through humans’ perceptions about the world around them (Bruce & Partridge, 2014; Yates et al., 2012). Relatedly, the informational role of emotions pertains to “experiential information,” which is defined as “experience-based information skills… rarely contained in documents… learned and absorbed by hand, over time, and in social environments” (Pollak, 2015, p. 8). (This stands in contrast with other traditions such as evangelical Christianity, which emphasizes the importance of fostering a personal relationship with Jesus over ritual elements that tend to necessitate communal worship.)

Some participants spoke – at times, almost apologetically – about not being able to put into words their religious experiences, since they are ongoing journeys, ineffable, and difficult to explain. For example, Rachel talked about how the spiritual and emotional aspects of her conversion are often “a lot stronger than the rational aspects,” but “it’s just that I don’t know how to talk about them. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s harder to convey.” Rachel’s remarks

⁴⁷ Prayer recited for divine guidance on a particular personal intention, issue or decision.
about the absence of an available vocabulary for articulating religious experiences lend support for the timeline drawing exercise which, although not implemented across the entire group of participants, provoked deep reflections on individual narratives of the past and present, and aspirations for the future. Each timeline representation was original and personal, ranging from more conventional chronological depictions to vivid, symbolic compositions. Yet, emotionally charged features (such as trajectories from depression to contentment, influential mentors and friends who have provided moral support and modelled positive traits, and traumatic events such as losing friends along the way) were prominent patterns.

Muslim converts may also maintain an emotional attachment to religious narratives, images, and objects. As January described:

“Even though I don’t practice Catholicism any more, as I’m getting older, I’m realizing these emotional ties I have… I think there’s still aspects of the Church and the iconography, more the aesthetics to me than anything. You know, the processions of the cross, that kind of stuff… It’s just a narrative that’s so close to my heart, growing up.”

Interestingly, Liam, who was also raised Catholic, shared the following response about his father-in-law presenting him with a silver keychain with the _shahada_ written on it after returning from a trip to a Muslim-majority country:

“There was something that I was connecting with that felt kind of special… The word mystery comes to mind… It wasn’t just a keychain, and yes it was a gift from my father-in-law, so that gave it some specialness, but there was something about the iconography and the symbolism behind it that seemed special.”

These comments illustrate the kind of visceral response Muslim converts may have to stories, texts, images, and objects that are loaded with meaning, which may not be reflected to the same extent in non-religious contexts. They also echo increasing attention in the last decade in library and information science and material religion to the sensory dimension of information practice, as discussed by Kiersten Latham in her phenomenological analysis of “numinous experiences” between museum visitors and objects (Latham, 2013; see also Meyer, 2008; Meyer et al., 2014; Morgan, 2008; George & Salvatori, 2008).
6 Experiential and embodied learning

Experiences of becoming Muslim include not merely affective responses, but also embodied practices such as learning to pray. For example, Liam described his ritual conversion and participation in communal prayer at a mosque as follows:

“It kind of felt like I was doing yoga! So I just focused on my breath, and got down… I wasn’t faking it. I was in the experience… I felt like I was being welcomed into a community. It was very heartfelt and warm to have all these Middle Eastern men coming up to me afterward, giving me their blessings – either in English or Arabic – and kissing me, hugging me, and it felt significant in some way.”

Liam’s description provoked me to think about my own experience growing up in the Catholic church, where religious practice was not simply about memorizing texts, but also about developing a sort of subconscious “muscle memory” about when to sit, stand, and kneel during liturgical celebrations. This kind of experience has been explored by anthropologists of religion who have identified the role that *habitus* (those elements below the surface, as represented in actions and narratives) plays in ritual participation (Coleman, 2003; Mittermaier, 2012). Liam’s recollection also aligns with findings about apprenticing literacy and embodied information experience (Gorichanaz, 2015; Lloyd, 2007; Lloyd, 2009; Lloyd, 2010) and “inscribed practice” (Hayles, 1999). These inscribed, bodily practices differ from accessing information online in that they require a person to be physically present in a particular space. And yet, both online and offline information practices appear to be central to conversion experiences – even ones that are as seemingly ambivalent as Liam’s. Similar to Lloyd’s analysis, Liam refers to the sense of community produced in the context of congregational prayer. The above quotation from Liam suggests that conversion to Islam involves experiential learning: incorporating rituals and recitations as part of oneself, to the point when they no longer need to be consciously remembered.

As the excerpt above suggests, learning about Islam and one’s place within this religion is an experiential process that occurs through observations, inward reflection, and sometimes, visceral connections to religious objects shared by loved ones. Liam explained his shift from looking outward to looking inward as follows:

“A lot of these practices and ways of being, and differences… I could look it up online, but I’m not… I could sit down with her [Liam’s wife] dad and I’m sure he would love to talk my ear off about all this stuff. But, I think what I’m realizing is that, I’m looking
inward to see what happens to me when I encounter this religion and practices… Kind of looking at my own internal compass… What do I want to do with this thing? And how do I respond to it?”

Related to the theme of navigation, Liam referred to his feelings as an “internal compass” to help determine how to deal with his somewhat ambivalent attachment to Islam. Liam’s experiences raise the question about embodied aspects of information practices and gaining knowledge through the senses. They problematize the dominant discourse of information behaviour as a cognitive or sociocultural phenomenon, by drawing attention to the intertwined sensory, affective, and cultural aspects of finding information about being Muslim (i.e., undergoing a spiritual or religious transformation). The physicality of the process of learning to pray and engage in other rituals differs from learning in many of the professional and educational contexts that have typically been studied in information science – although it shares characteristics with serious leisure pursuits such as sports, visual arts, cooking, music, and performance.

The process of learning how to pray exemplifies the experiential nature of religious information practices. For instance, Hermione documented in her journal her experience of learning to pray, as follows: first, through inspiration from her friends, followed by confusing online research, then canvassing her grandmother’s expertise and one-on-one teaching and buying children's books on the subject, and finally, by practicing through regular salah and Friday prayer attendance. Hermione also discussed variances between Sunni and Shia ways of praying – a topic that was raised in interviews by other participants. As Hermione explained, prayer can be overwhelming, as instructions and movements are complicated. Hermione added that there are technical and spiritual aspects of prayer, and distinguished between learning the “mechanical” skills required to pray properly (i.e. postures, reciting Quranic verses in Arabic) and “learning deeply.” Hermione’s reflections about prayer reveal that although “mechanical” skills can be learned through a process of observation and practice that has parallels in other situations (e.g., Lave, 2011 re: apprenticeship among tailors in Liberia), learning to pray also involves a profound spiritual experience that is highly personal.

Embodied information practices may take place through enacting prayer, or through simply listening. One example of this kind of experience is what Rachel called a “floating inspiration,”
such as hearing the *azhan* while visiting the Middle East. Other participants commented on how listening to *dua*, sermons, and lectures played a key role in their conversion experiences. Hermione described listening to the *Quran* on her plane ride to visit her grandmother, and recalled thinking that, “this is really, really beautiful” and that “it just added to my fascination.”

Social scientists have alluded to aspects of listening for the purposes of learning and presenting religious values and rhetorical patterns in their research on Muslim conversion in Europe and North America. For instance, Kate Zebiri’s interviews with British Muslim converts revealed that listening to devotional tapes and CDs, and to trusted friends, acquaintances, imams, and scholars for guidance in finding the information required to express moral and religious beliefs were widespread practices (Zebiri, 2007, pp. 49-50). Another study similarly observed that verbal communication was a critical element for native British Muslim converts to develop their sense of religious identity – particularly, learning how to pray in Arabic and invoking an “authentic” religious vocabulary (Köse, 1994).

Research on female Muslim converts in the Netherlands describes how listening to others’ conversion narratives mediate experiences of embracing Islam (van Nieuwkerk, 2006; van Nieuwkerk, 2008). A study on *da‘wah* in the United States and Europe lends further support for the significance of listening to other Muslims for those engaged in the process of converting to Islam (Poston, 1992). These studies echo the importance of listening as an information practice that complements textual interaction and contributes to learning about Islam and what it means to be Muslim.

Attending live and online lectures involves listening and watching the speaker. In the case of in-person lectures, it also involves dressing and moving through space based on certain norms, which may impact converts’ access to information and their capacity to share information more freely and authoritatively. For instance, Aisha wrote in her pilot study journal about wearing *hijab* “to see how I felt in it” during a three-day trip to attend a women’s *fiqh* course. Aisha’s comments indicate that the physical experience of wearing *hijab* can be an important resource for women who are going through the process of embracing Islam. Aisha also noted during our first interview that:

“The mosque was often a place where it was just a little bit strange for me at first… You don't know how to pray in congregation, you don’t know what to do when you walk in.

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48 See also Hirschkind (2006) about the sensory environment created by cassette-recorded sermons in Cairo, which enables pious living among “ordinary Muslims” (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 8).
It’s not like Christianity, where you go and you sit in a pew… There’s a lot of rules and regulations, and that’s the part I like about Islam, but it’s also really overwhelming for a newcomer… It’s an unbelievable learning process. You’re definitely drinking from the fire hose.”

Aisha’s description above about the active nature of congregational participation at a mosque further illustrates the physicality of information in the context of religious conversion. While many of the religious prescriptions to which Aisha refers are documented in texts, the physical participation involved in congregational prayer and rituals also needs to be learned through practice.

At the same time as being manifested as physical postures and bodily senses, religious and spiritual information is also closely related to tacit knowledge, which has been distinguished from explicit knowledge, as follows:

“Highly personal and hard to formalize, making it difficult to communicate or to share with others. Subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches fall into this category of knowledge. Furthermore, tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in an individual’s action and experience, as well as in the ideals, values, or emotions he or she embraces” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 8).

Tacit knowledge is ingrained, often unmarked, knowledge about Islam, spirituality, or information literacy strategies. As defined by Wenger, tacit knowledge includes the “conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions… [that] may never be articulated, yet they are unmistakable signs of membership in communities of practice” (1998, p. 47). For example, Jennifer spoke of how her process of evaluating sources was difficult to put into words, because it was so deeply established – presumably from years of education and professional experience in the legal field (which is centered around presenting and interpreting evidence). Alexandra's discussion of invisible knowledge and wisdom also supports the concept of tacit knowledge, which is under the surface and difficult to articulate. As Alexandra explained, “your knowledge and your wisdom is not necessarily spelled out in your face.”

Having tacit knowledge about Islam may help converts to educate themselves, but it may also pose challenges since it is not immediately visible and others may make assumptions about what converts know about Islam. Whether tacit knowledge is understood to be contained in the mind (as in the case of undocumented rules and regulations) or in the body (as in the cases of how to
pray, fast, and conduct other ritual practices), its importance in religious conversion experiences cannot be overlooked.

Senses of seeking and yearning can also be framed as experiential forms of information. One illustration is the following excerpt from Hermione’s pilot study journal, which reflects on when she began her undergraduate studies and “started feeling a sense of yearning for experiencing the gratitude I felt for the gift of life, for the gift of trials, and for the gift of good company. That’s when I decided I wanted to learn how to pray like my Muslim friends.” At one of the spiritual discussion events I attended with a local campus Muslim student group, a thread that ran across the conversation dealt with how a person’s love of God is something that is tasted or experienced – not necessarily after reaching the end of the path towards seeking God, but as part of the process of seeking. As the influential Muslim theologian and philosopher al-Ghazali writes, “If you intend to seek Me, then you have arrived.” This idea also speaks to the process of continuous, lifelong conversion.49

7 Aligning experiences with religious worldview

As mentioned, serendipitous encounters with information perceived to be personally relevant and the idea that “Islam came to me” may be explained as a way of aligning personal experiences within an Islamic framework. For example, Aisha commented on how her conversion happened unexpectedly, without searching for a religion. As she told me:

“I never sought out a religion… That actually conforms to an Islamic perspective, which is, ‘Allah guides who he wills.’… I sort of felt like it was something I had no choice in… You’re coming to believe, it’s not something that you can plan in advance.”

Suggesting that personal experiences line up with Islamic beliefs set out in the Quran is one way for Muslim converts to provide scriptural explanations for critical events in their lives, and thus a means of asserting their religious identities. Being able to link their own life experiences to an Islamic worldview is particularly important for receiving recognition from peer Muslims. Not only do such linkages validate converts’ spiritual journeys, they also demonstrate a familiarity with religious texts and serve to prove a certain level of expertise. Aisha was not alone in

49 Also continuous in that religious identity is not necessarily perceived as separate from other parts of one’s sense of self (e.g. culture, nationality, race, etc.).
connecting her personal experiences with an Islamic worldview. Others talked about how their lifestyle and outlook were compatible with Islam. For instance, Alexandra remarked that:

“I’ve never smoked, I wasn’t really drinking… And suddenly I was with a group of people who didn’t talk… about their parties, about drinking… So I kind of just fit in, and before you know it, I just started to hang out there [MSA club space at her college].”

Similarly, Ruqayyah talked about her high school and post-secondary experience as follows:

“I never did the clubbing thing or the drinking thing. So, for me, Islam was not such a big step because of the lifestyle choices I had and just being studious, studying, while like my friends are dropping out.”

Rachel also discussed how her lifestyle as a university student aligned well with Islamic norms around social conduct. As she described:

“I like quiet, but I’m not anti-social. And same with my two [Muslim] friends [whom she met during her undergraduate studies] … We had the same understanding, that we like quiet, but we also like to socialize and have friends and so the three of us kind of stuck together.”

As the above quotations suggest, conforming to an Islamic lifestyle can happen whether the person initially intends it to or not. Whether it meant abstaining from alcohol and activities that do not align well with Islamic values (what Wenger calls “experiences of non-participation” [1998, p. 165]), or finding common ground with peers who shared intellectual interests, several participants found that their way of living naturally matched with Islam.

A related issue is that of fitra, the notion mentioned earlier, that humans have an inherent disposition to be Muslim. As Seif explained:

“Muslims believe that everybody has inherent nature to believe… They quote Rumi, for example, like in his *Mathnawi*…, ‘the music made from the reed flute… is missing its source’… And the nature, fitra, is, we’re not a blank slate from the world… That nature we have, that’s embedded in our DNA… It manifests itself in part by just searching for meaning in something other than material goods… And, the religious person or the Muslim says, that meaning is seeking pleasure from God.”

Alexandra summarized *fitra* as follows: “basically, everyone and everything is born Muslim. And we are raised to believe differently.” Dahlia also discussed *fitra*, noting that it:

“Denotes the pure nature of human beings. That we’re essentially good… that we’re essentially inclined to believe in a higher power but through socialization we might not believe in God or might believe in a whole bunch of other stuff, but essentially our nature’s good and that goodness is derived from a belief in God.”
These three perspectives shed light on the idea that a Muslim cosmology can exist before converting. Alexandra related her own experience to *fitra*, as follows:

“Before I even learned the word Muslim, I already saw the world through Muslim eyes… So whatever happened, I already interpreted it, according to the, sort of, Muslim point of view. Because I had already encountered it, and accepted it.”

The concept of *fitra* has implications for information practice. It raises the question of why a person would feel the need to seek out information about being Muslim if they have already accepted an Islamic worldview. Are they aspiring to become experts on Islam? Is the process of becoming more informed a technique to gain acceptance from Muslim community members? While generalized answers to these questions fall outside the scope of this dissertation, one possible explanation of the motivations behind seeking information about being Muslim even after accepting *fitra* as a worldview is understanding conversion to Islam as a continuous project.

8 Imagining and aspiring

Part of engaging in a process of continuous conversion is to imagine the future and aspire to accomplish goals. Some aspirations relate to religious life (e.g., attending Friday prayer more often, wearing *hijab* on a regular basis, going on *hajj* or *umrah*), while others are more general (e.g., learning Arabic, starting a family). Aisha told me that her “dream” with her own research is to “try to change” how support services for Muslim converts are run – in a more organized, “professional,” and empathetic way and to create a “safe space” where converts can talk about the difficulties they face, “even if you can’t solve it”. Alexandra expressed a similar concern with her role in her community as follows: “I hope to get more involved in the community at large, you know, do some volunteering, in the Muslim community or outside of it.” Other examples capture how participants’ aspirations are directly linked with seeking and sharing information. For instance, Dahlia spoke about highlighting articles she wishes to read on a written list, and “keep[s] an ongoing list of Islamic books and stuff that I want to read,” while Rachel mentioned that she would “love to learn a lot about Islamic history.” Hermione discussed how she would like to use her local mosque more to “learn from it,” and that she is still looking to “rebuild” a patient, active “atmosphere of learning” in her current city to continue to learn deeply, “directly from one or more scholars.” Jennifer described her vision for an accessible
debate platform or forum such as an open, reputable magazine, “where everybody can discuss and write.” It is worth noting that these goals reflect middle class aspirations; comparing these attitudes with converts from different socioeconomic backgrounds would prove to be fruitful for future studies.

Self-presentation in the context of family life and in public is another key issue facing Muslim converts. For example, Aisha raised the following point about praying openly in public:

“I try to plan my day so I’m nearby spaces where I’m comfortable praying… But I know people that will drop everything wherever they are, and just pray in the middle of the street. And I aspire to be in that place one day. I’m not there quite yet!”

In the following quotation, Kelly also captures the issue of public perception:

“I don’t wear hijab, and I never have in my life. But it’s something that I really want to do… When I wear hijab, does that mean that I’m going to want to… perform in other ways?… I wouldn’t want a Muslim man or woman to come up to me and say, ‘You’re not wearing hijab… You’re a bad Muslim’… They don’t know inside, that I’m trying my best to get myself to that point, and that this is a process.”

While Aisha’s comments speak to her reservations about praying in an open public setting, Kelly’s comments about aspiring to wear hijab address the complicated nature of this decision, and anticipated judgments from peer Muslims. Kelly articulates how her decision is informed by navigating the tension between her personal aspirations to dress a certain way and expectations about an audience’s response to that choice. January also spoke about how questions from fellow Muslims and the public inform her sense of self. As she explained:

“I wish I could be received as a Muslim… When people ask me, ‘Are you Muslim?’ I don’t say I’m Canadian, I don’t say I’m a convert. I say, ‘I’m a [western European nationality]-Canadian-[another western European nationality] Muslim’… That’s what I am.”

These comments connect with an observation I made at the convert discussion group, where attendees sought validation for their religious practice and canvassed the shaykh’s expertise for clarification and approval on specific everyday issues. Even seemingly minute details would often lead to animated and lengthy discussions about topics ranging from gender relations (e.g. women attending mosque) to prayer (e.g., how to properly prepare for prayer, how to negotiate travel scenarios), and from food (e.g., how can you be certain that something is halal?) to physical appearance (e.g., is nail polish permitted?). Not only did attendees seek expertise, but
by demonstrating their knowledge in front of their peers, these interactions also seemed to affirm their own religious identities.

In addition to self-presentation and demonstrating knowledge, information practice manifests itself in the ways that Muslim converts model behaviours of revered historical figures. For example, in the following quotation, Seif elaborates on how a shared aspiration among Muslims is to strive throughout their lives to emulate Muhammad:

“The Muslim is supposed to take after the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him… The way he treated his parents, the way he treated his friends, the way he treated his spouse, his kids… If you’re living this seriously and you’re practicing seriously and you take his teaching seriously, there’s no way that doesn’t rub off on you somehow.”

The idea that Muhammad’s example influences the daily lives and actions of devoted Muslims suggests that reading, learning about, listening to recitations from, and speaking about the Sunnah (recorded sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad) is an example of an information practice – a habitus that is learned over time through membership in Muslim communities. In other words, practicing the Sunnah (by invoking Muhammad’s example of good character) is one way that Muslim converts learn to adhere to their religion and present their religious identities to others. Practicing the Sunnah is comparable to Christians who strive to model what they understand to be the perfect character of Jesus, according to the New Testament. Although they recognize that perfection (defined in relation to Jesus) is impossible, they actively and strive towards this ideal nonetheless, in their prayers, speech, and actions. The process of continuously practicing the Sunnah is mediated not only by texts, but also by spending time with Muslim friends and revered Muslim figures. As Muslim converts learn about acceptable behaviour from trusted members of their social circles (even if those circles extend to online dialogues rather than remaining as entirely face-to-face interactions), they affirm their sense of religiosity and their place within this new religious landscape. At the same time, along with its structuring disposition, this practice still leaves room for a variety of actions. As Mahmood points out, although it is partly learned and acquired through membership in a cultural group, a habitus is actively formed by individual persons as they coordinate outward behaviours with inward emotions and thoughts (2004, pp. 136–7). For Muslim converts, their participation in the religion they have embraced involves abiding by what are understood to be authoritative guidelines about how Muslims should behave, and their own personal intentions and interpretations.
Whether related to ongoing learning through increased reading and finding spaces for spiritual
development, or to presenting oneself as a Muslim in the public sphere and responding to fellow
Muslims, these excerpts point to how central information is to conversion experiences. As we
have seen in this chapter and which will be elaborated upon in the chapters to follow, the sources
with which Muslim converts interact and the experiences they have with information are not
restricted to written words preserved in digital or printed forms; rather, they extend to auditory,
material, and embodied aspects of forming a religious identity.

9 Un-mosqued trend

North American Muslims are increasingly learning about and living their religion outside of
traditional, bricks-and-mortar institutions (Haddad, 2011; UnMosqued, 2014). This trend
certainly applies to the Muslim converts who participated in my project. As Dahlia explained:

“I don’t really go to the mosque for my religious knowledge anymore… The mosque
isn’t a place I go, which is sad, because I do like being in a mosque, when I’m there by
myself, praying… And the feeling of being connected.”

The reasons for moving away from mosques to meet spiritual needs are plentiful: January spoke
about feeling “profoundly uncomfortable” when she started going to mosques in Ontario, and
Hermione shared her experiences of feeling marginalized as a Shia in Sunni-dominated MSA
spaces. Others discussed wanting a space dedicated to converts, whose information and spiritual
needs differ from “born Muslims.” Olivier’s wife added that the main barrier to Olivier
developing his Muslim identity has been “trouble finding a place, a mosque, to go to downtown.”

Such experiences echo Scott Flower’s analysis, which addressed how the “un-mosqued” trend
can lead to isolation and alienation from the Muslim community and society-at-large (“What
motivates someone to convert to Islam?”). In addition to possible alienation, this trend has
implications for how converts search for, access, and interpret information that is most salient to
developing their religious identities. Some participants expressed how they are actively trying to
find mosques that are right for them – places where, in Hermione’s words, they could “fit in” and
that are geographically accessible and relevant to their interests. At the same time, these
difficulties are juxtaposed with experiences of converts such as Rachel, who spoke about how
welcome she has always felt at the mosque she attends, and the connections that she has made there (e.g., with another young convert and an elderly woman who had a previous career in political journalism).

Still, the “un-mosqued” trend was pronounced by the places participants chose to meet with me: not at mosques or campus multi-faith facilities, but in cafés conveniently located in their neighbourhoods or near their workplaces, in quiet meeting rooms and study spaces on their university campus, and in their homes. In the absence of a centralized congregation space, I faced the challenge of how to conceptualize “the field.” Instead of participating in community meetings, classes, events, and celebrations at one local mosque, I thought of “the field” as a sort of constellation across the region, noticing links between some participants and local Muslim organizations, while other participants told me about how they independently research and discover their spirituality.

I also wondered whether the “un-mosqued” trend is heightened among converts. If so, how does this affect converts’ sense of belonging, and how they know where to start looking for information? Kelly elaborated on this issue, which she referred to as “system navigating,” as follows:

“\textbf{You’d actually be surprised at the number of people who leave Islam, because of the lack of support that they get, and the lack of clear understanding… It may be an issue of} \textbf{– they call it in the social work field, “system navigating”… People have a difficulty understanding where to go to get information, or who to talk to.”}

Kelly spoke about navigating Muslim communities in a similar way to other kinds of social systems, which are addressed in her professional field of social work and community development (Hayes et al., 2015; Newbold et al., 2013; Noonan et al., 2012; Peel & Harding, 2014; Walker et al., 2015). Some key challenges included being a minority Muslim/visibly different from the dominant ethnocultural Muslim community, finding trusted religious educators and leaders, and deciphering transliterated religious texts. Kelly’s reflections made me think of my own experience of navigating the GTA’s constellation of communities and organizations that provide religious education programming, social events and support services, and spiritual counselling to Muslim converts. Obtaining access to field sites was slow to start, and without previous research experience or self-identifying with any Muslim communities in
the GTA, I often did not know reputable from dubious organizations until hearing from multiple participants. Kelly’s comments also led me to consider a comparable metaphor of information systems – not in the traditional sense of retrieval systems with inputs/queries and outputs/results, but with numerous components and points of connection. When used successfully, these systems can support learning and knowledge development. (In contrast, when these systems are unresponsive or not designed with users in mind, they create feelings of frustration, confusion, and being overwhelmed [Bilal, 2005; Dervin & Nilan, 1986; Kuhlthau, 1991].)

Other participants similarly alluded to challenges related to this process of system navigating. For example, Hermione described interacting with her local mosque as follows:

“I have no idea who to contact there. And I emailed the sort of like general admin of the mosque once, maybe two months ago. And they haven’t replied... And then, I think last week, I was like, you know what, I’m just going to email the scholar directly, ‘cause no one else is replying. So I emailed, and they didn’t reply... I find that very challenging. I go there and I really like it and I just wish I could use the space more and learn more from it… But it's a bit hard when I don’t know anyone there and I don’t know who to ask.”

Similarly, January commented on finding her way by “floating” between ethnic mosques:

“The thing with Toronto I’ve noticed is that… there’s certainly ethnic enclaves… Which you’d expect to a certain degree, but for me, not really belonging to any of them… I kind of feel like I’m a bit of a floater. Like I kind of go between this one and between this one… For me, it can kind of feel a bit lonely, and in that respect, it does kind of feel closed off.”

January’s and Hermione’s comments reveal that navigating the system of Muslim communities in the GTA can involve feeling like an outsider at mosques that are tied to a particular ethnic population, and difficulty identifying and getting a response from the primary contact person. Another consideration is fluency in Arabic, which Jennifer describes as follows:

“The language is a big barrier as well. Because if you don’t speak Arabic, you’re very limited… The Quran is in Arabic, the literature – ancient literature – is in Arabic.”

Several participants similarly spoke of the inherent connection between the Arabic language and Islam. Dahlia, for instance, talked about how learning Arabic helped her grow spiritually and feel closer to God. Others reflected on how an understanding of Arabic can help to contextualize Quranic verses and interpret their meaning beyond direct translations of words and phrases.
As mentioned earlier (see section 2.2), Muslim converts in the GTA need to navigate not only Islamic sources of information and schools of thought, but also the internal divides across mosques and community centres in the region. Participants often spoke about the distinction between “born Muslims” and “converts/new Muslims,” and Dahlia referred to a “new indigenous Islam” that is being constructed by converts and born Muslims who were raised outside of predominantly Muslim countries. Within the GTA, there are ethnic divisions across mosques, and divergent worldviews and cultural practices – which Alexandra characterized in the following way:

“Most people that I know who are Muslim, they might have been born in this country, their parents usually are not. Or, they came to this country when they were young… Inevitably, that bears on their view of things, of their view of how to live your religion or practice your religion… their view of society, and priorities, their values. Everything has to do with where they’re coming from. And that makes a big difference.”

Another internal division is sectarian. Although Seif said that “overall, it [sectarianism] hasn’t been a huge problem for me,” Aisha remarked (with reference to the disjuncture between Sunni and Shia) that, “there was a big division that happened between us, it does exist, it causes wars today, it’s a big deal.” Despite these differences and internal tensions, efforts of inclusivity do occur. For instance, Alexandra described the following event organized by her Muslim student group during her undergraduate studies:

“It wasn’t labeled, “the Sunni-Shia dialogue”. It was called, you know, a discussion group, but both groups were invited. And everybody’s invited. We had some non-Muslims there. And we ran this program out of my library for a year, and it was very successful.”

Initiatives that work towards embracing a plurality of opinions and voices, and encouraging intra- and interfaith learning are also happening. January talked about an interfaith reading group that she attended, which was catered to Jewish and Muslim women, as follows:

“You really see the other person’s humanity… When you talk about these very contentious political issues, you realize that there’s people living in them as well, and you keep that in account when you come up with opinions of what this group should do and what that group should do, or what can be done.”

The contrast between inclusivity and division impacts how Muslim converts navigate “the system” of Muslim communities and schools of thought that are present in the GTA. It also has
implications for the ways in which credibility, trust, authority, and authenticity are assessed. These considerations will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described Muslim converts’ experiences of encountering obstacles while searching for information, receiving guidance to navigate the information seeking process, and aligning personal narratives within a religious framework. In particular, it described the prominent place of serendipity in religious information practices, especially when it comes to finding resources online. This chapter also reflected on participants’ experiences of converting to Islam in a post-9/11, increasingly un-mosqued context and in a metropolitan area characterized by multiculturalism which simultaneously offers a wealth of possible Muslim communities to join and presents intra-faith divisions. Socioeconomic issues such as spiritual care programs being offered primarily through post-secondary institutions, the expense of obtaining translated books and attending religious education courses were also considered. Furthermore, this chapter described participants’ reading practices and the spiritual rewards derived from reading, in addition to the emotional and embodied aspects that inform religious identity formation. Finally, this chapter reflected on how participants aligned their personal experiences and aspirations with an Islamic worldview.

By connecting these experiences to the overarching theme of navigation, this chapter suggests that looking for information is a key step towards understanding Islam, its local communities and resources, and what it means to be Muslim. The excerpts from fieldnotes, journal entries, and interviews with participants help to contextualize information practices such as serendipitous discovery, reading, ongoing education, drawing on intuition and the senses to make decisions, and providing scriptural explanations for critical events within a social world affected by socioeconomic and geographical accessibility, a growing movement away from mosques, post-9/11 politics, and internal cultural, sectarian, and linguistic diversity. By identifying some of the ways in which Muslim converts in the Toronto area seek information, the challenges they face in doing so, and the strategies they employ to address these challenges, this chapter introduces a series of findings that will also explore how the ways in which Muslim converts evaluate and share information contributes to their understandings of religious authority and self-expression.
Chapter 7
Authority

Chapter Overview

This chapter explores how Muslim converts living in the Toronto area assess peer recommendations, and articulate their trust in religious scholars and leaders – in person and online. Additionally, the chapter examines how the so-called “crisis of authority” in Islam impacts the ways in which converts filter content to decipher theological and political agendas, and evaluate the credibility and authenticity of sources. Finally, the chapter reflects on the process of how converts learn their religion and their place within its local and global communities: specifically, perceptions about what qualifications authority figures should have and the relevance of their opinions, norms for acquiring religious knowledge, the socially mediated character of information exchange (including supportive peer networks and mentorship), and the influence of educational institutions and post-secondary programs on converts’ approaches to developing religious knowledge and identities.

1 Finding and learning through digital media

Multimedia sources play an important role in educating Muslim converts about their religion. As Seif explained:

“I came into contact with information that ended up clearing things up because I paid attention to a lot of… what the Muslim scholars were saying with regard to world issues… If you listen to them for a long period of time, they might be talking about their religion itself. And some of them are just cool to listen to… Hamza Yusuf for example, classically trained, very charismatic.”

For Seif, although he recognizes it can be misguided to obtain information about Islam uncritically from the internet (what he calls the dangers of “Islam by Google”), online lectures provide a fruitful tool for listening to scholars’ perspectives on various issues and clarifying his own stance on world affairs. They are also enjoyable to listen to, which motivates listeners to return to scholars’ YouTube channels and related online media to tune in for additional content during their spare time. The social element of digital media such as YouTube presents
opportunities for interaction between content creators (i.e. scholars such as Hamza Yusuf) and individuals watching videos and listening to lectures (i.e. Muslim converts) through comments features and links to the content creator’s social media accounts. It is also worth noting that in Seif’s experience – as in the experiences of several other participants – the process of clarifying details about religious practices, doctrinal issues, and Islamic interpretations of and responses to current political events was not necessarily initiated in a deliberate or purposive way. This non-purposive or unexpected experience of encountering clarifying information connects with information behaviour literature on accidentally finding useful resources\textsuperscript{50}.

Other participants were less enthusiastic about interacting with digital media to explore their spirituality. Aisha’s comments below illustrate this hesitance:

“\textit{I wouldn’t say that I put a lot of credibility ever to anything online… You will read something and you’ll Google it and you’ll try to read it in ten other places, and if the same thing keeps being discussed, you’ll kind of go, okay, that’s probably a generally accepted principle… That’s why, other than some of the main sites, I really struggle with being online.”}

This sentiment may be tied to a religious discourse about the negative aspects of social media. At the RIS convention, counsellor and religious leader Dr. Yassir Fazaga presented on the negative aspects of social media – specifically, their negative impact on health and links to obesity, cyberbullying, and depriving us of the ability to think deep thoughts and have meaningful interactions, setting up an illusion that real communication has taken place. While I cannot draw a direct line between Aisha’s response about online credibility and Dr. Fazaga’s presentation, these attitudes suggest that religious scholars and experts play a role in influencing converts’ opinions about digital media – especially those who are resistant to online communication or religious innovations.

In contrast, digital media can offer engaging tools for converts to connect and learn with peer Muslims. This is a topic that is being explored by anthropologists and communication scholars (e.g. Aouragh, 2012; Soukup, 2012) who consider “the impact of mobile apps that focus on religious practice, communities, and religious issues, and/or those that may be used for religious purposes whether or not they were originally developed for that purpose” (Fewkes, 2016). For

\textsuperscript{50} See Chapter Six re: serendipitous information encountering.
example, Hermione described creating a blog with a friend of hers to establish an online forum for minority Muslims, as follows:

“One of my friends… they are Shia… They’re not saying, ‘This is a Shia thing.’ But, there has been a huge gap in terms of information… I need an avenue where I’m comfortable expressing myself the way I want to, and I also think that more, minority Muslims, it’s important to have that forum as well. Not just to have avenues where you can even have discussions, but also where other Muslims can learn about you.”

Alexandra spoke about how she shares and receives information from her Muslim friends through a variety of digital media:

“Sharing them online, on Facebook, or emailing me an article… There’s some websites that kind of straddle this line between sort of community politics and Islam, or like women’s issues… Like, taking off the hijab is a big topic right now… I’m going to go and see what’s the latest article about that, and what does this person say? And then, in a way, I can talk about it.”

Rather than creating an obstacle to genuine conversations, Alexandra’s comments suggest that online platforms such as Facebook and blogs can facilitate reflection and communication about one’s religion and how they express their religious identity. Hermione also spoke about relying on online communities for learning and self-expression, noting how, “when I was alone, in my area in [eastern Canadian province], I sort of had to rely so much on different online communities. Not just to learn, but also to find somewhere where I could feel comfortable and be myself. ‘Cause I couldn’t find it in my physical environment.” These excerpts demonstrate how participants’ perceptions and uses of digital media seem to fall into two camps: thinking of digital media as tools for sharing supportive and relevant information, or, as platforms to avoid when looking for trustworthy and credible information. These perceptions further indicate a possible hierarchy of value that plays out when gathering information (e.g. online content ranked below printed materials that have undergone an editorial or peer review process). Online platforms are particularly useful for women, who tend to be marginalized at religious courses and conventions, where scholars and presenters in positions of authority are predominantly male. Male-dominated forums for presenting may be influenced by widespread beliefs about the lack of obligation for women to participate in prayer at mosques and hold positions of leadership and teaching outside the home. Such scriptural support for separate religious duties for women and men can discourage women from becoming authorities, or at least limits women’s involvement as prayer leaders and public experts in certain communities. In contrast, the internet facilitates
connections across space, enabling Muslim women to impart their knowledge, exchange opinions outside of gender-segregated mosques, and find mentors who can more closely relate to their experiences. This pattern echoes Anna Stewart’s research on Charismatic Evangelical Christian women in Brighton, UK, who used Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other online media to become authoritative information producers and give voice to testimonies of faith that were previously relegated to the domestic sphere, rather than public church gatherings (Stewart, 2012).

Digital media are prevalent for fostering connections and reaching out to Muslims and the general public. Convert support and Muslim spiritual care organizations, major religious conventions, and campus clubs have an online presence, including active Facebook pages, Twitter profiles, and weekly or daily email newsletters to circulate event invitations, news, and announcements. At the sisters iftar I attended, the organizer told me about the group’s WhatsApp mailing list, which keeps group members up-to-date about events and helps them stay in touch. This level of online presence contrasted with the mosque where I attended a biweekly discussion group for converts, which did not have social media platforms, hosted a website that lacked updated details about meeting times, and announced scheduling changes via an email sent by a volunteer member of the congregation to a list of regular attendees. (It was only after adding my name to this list upon my first visit that I became aware of cancelled or postponed classes.) My observations echo Rachel’s comments about a mosque website that she found in the city where she grew up. As Rachel explained:

“Their website’s so out of date that I don't even know, are they open, every single day?… The only way I found out that information was by, some of the people’s phone numbers were listed, and none of them were official delegates of the masjid either… At least here [at her current mosque], I can just look online, I know when it’s open, I know when the prayer times are.”

Rachel’s comments illustrate an active approach to seeking information – to the point that she was willing to go through the “weird and uncomfortable” experience of “calling strangers” to find out when the mosque was available for prayer. However, Olivier remarked that social media use can also happen in a more “passive” way, as he articulated in the interview excerpt below:

51 This trend is not specific to Islam. As religious studies scholar Rebekka King notes with regard to progressive Christian congregations in Canada, “the internet provides another venue in which they can connect internationally with fellow adherents through websites dedicated to progressive Christian thinkers, publications and organizations or through a variety of online forums and networking sites” (King, 2012, p. 206).
“I don’t really participate in anything online. I mean I follow, for example, [Muslim organization], or [Muslim prayer leader], on Twitter. And so I’m kind of on the passive end. I’m kind of receiving information online… I’m not tweeting, I’m not facebooking, I’m not in any forums or anything like that… I don’t feel the urge, I don’t feel like I have that much to add.”

Olivier’s comments shed light on how converts’ online engagement may depend on how much religious knowledge they believe they have, or how much they think they are able to contribute to conversations. Since Olivier marked his official conversion only two years before we met, his amount of perceived expertise may be lower than converts such as January who are involved in organizing religious discussion groups, or Hermione who has plans to start a forum to encourage intra-faith dialogue.

2 Book recommendations
Canvassing ideas for books to read and receiving book recommendations is a key way that Muslim converts learn about Islam and develop their beliefs. For example, January told me about how an article her father read led her to read a book that renewed her interest in Islam. As she explained:

“I don’t think it was premeditated or anything like that, maybe it was… hidayah, you know, God just sent it… He was reading an article that had an excerpt of Reza Aslan’s ‘No God but God.’ And I read that book, and suddenly, I became interested in Islam again… All the stuff… I was into… like, listening to punk songs and metal songs and hearing about justice and stuff like that… Reading Reza Aslan’s book, I could see that was so much part of the Islamic tradition.”

For January, this particular book resonated because it drew attention to the social justice element within Islam – an element that is integral to much of the punk music she enjoyed listening to. It is also possible that January’s awareness of her father’s familiarity with her interest in social justice allowed her to trust his recommendation and go on to read the book. It is worth noting that January describes this experience of being directed towards a specific book within an Islamic framework of hidayah, the notion that Allah provides guidance to humans through the Quran and Sunnah, and more broadly, by leading humans in the right direction.

Olivier described the following “vetting” process involved in deciding which books to read:
“There’s a certain… vetting, or… recommendation that comes with… those kind of books, so I’m not just going out and starting reading things on my own… I mean there’s so much going on on the internet… there’s tons of books… it’s like a jungle… Knowledgeable friends who can make recommendations is important… as long as I have those kind of resources, I would stick to that.”

As Olivier mentions, receiving recommendations from experts such as a chaplain who has studied Islam helps him to get through the vast “jungle” of information available online and in print publications.

Dahlia approached certain people in her life for book recommendations, as follows:

“I had gone to my Arabic teacher on one or two occasions and asked him to recommend some books, or people. Books, mainly. And he did, and I picked up a few of them. And so there would be particular people that I would like, go to and ask for knowledge.”

For Dahlia, her perception of other people influences her decisions about who to approach to canvass book recommendations. Before asking someone to refer her to readings, Dahlia assesses whether that person has the requisite knowledge and shared worldview and values to offer meaningful and relevant recommendations.

Although book recommendations can be a helpful way of learning about Islam, the following quotation from Alexandra reveals that such recommendations need to be thoughtfully and patiently put forward, with the person’s context in mind:

“But they sort of have like… a filing cabinet of like, things that they can flick at you. So you ask a question, they’re like, ‘Oh well, I remember this hadith that says this.’ And then, flick… So basically they literally throw the book at you. But throwing the book to your face doesn’t really answer the question.”

The above examples suggest that book recommendations from trusted, knowledgeable, and respected family members, friends, and teachers are a form of sharing valued expertise that is equally, if not more important than, recommendations made on an online platform (e.g. Amazon Books) or in a library readers’ advisory setting. This aspect of personal advice reflects Islamic (and other religious and academic) traditions of one-on-one scholarly guidance and methodologies that rank the authenticity of texts (Anderson, 2010; Khan, 2014). Library and Information Science research on the practice of reading also suggests that books are often prioritized over other resources in North America and Europe since they are assumed to have
undergone a process of vetting before being published (Lundh & Dolatkhah, 2015; Lyons, 2010; Watling, 2009). Furthermore, religious adherents may understand sacred texts to have divine origins, whereas online sources are not necessarily considered to have the same spiritual significance (Kari, 2007; Michels, 2014).

3 Categories and “resource boxes”

Along with book recommendations and digital media, Muslim converts’ personal print and digital collections of books and articles inform their understanding about Islam and what it means to be Muslim. Organizing online content by using bookmarks or “favourites” folders is one key way that participants create coherence out of large collections. This categorization activity applies to existing collections and to new materials added to such collections after being recommended by friends. For instance, Alexandra said:

“On Facebook, when someone shares a lecture and they’re like, ‘Oh, it’s this amazing lecture about this guy,’ I’m like, ‘Okay. Save. Favourites.’ And there’s like a tab that says, ‘Islamic Materials’ on it.”

Alexandra’s comments indicate the importance of labelling religious-specific content so that it can be easily found later on. They also reflect how the information that converts encounter often derives from friends’ recommendations, rather than a purposive search process. Similarly, Dahlia explained how she organizes and shares the materials that she finds, as follows:

“I definitely have favourites. And I bookmark a lot of my favourite websites… If it’s an article I really do like, I pdf it, and I’ll save it, I’ll send it to people I care about. Or people I feel would benefit from it. And I save really good articles. And I highlight the ones I want to read, and the ones I haven’t read, I’ll just leave it there for later. So I have a bunch of articles in a folder.”

Others admitted that they tend to bookmark websites and then forget about them. As Aisha told me:

“I bookmark a lot of things, but I rarely look back at them ‘cause there’s so much in there… There’s certain things I do keep on my Favourites bar… Like some sites that are related specifically to converts, or if I find like this site that actually helps you look up hadith and it’s a good site, I remember marking that one.”

In contrast with bookmarked websites that may not be prioritized on a “Favourites” bar or organized under specific labels (or, forgotten entirely), many participants classify print materials
about Islam under particular categories. For example, Jennifer spoke about how the books and articles in her collections fall into one of three main subjects: traditional Arabic literature (e.g. *hadith* collections, *tafsir*, and books by early Islamic scholars such as al-Ghazali “or the Seerah of the Prophet, books that were written before the [dawah] pamphlets came into being”), North American academic literature (from mostly Muslim scholars), and Western European academic literature (from mostly non-Muslim scholars). Several participants also commented on how they organized their home libraries. Interestingly, although Aisha talked about bookmarking and then forgetting about websites, she walked me through the following intentional arrangement for her collection of religious books – a public display in her home, inviting her guests’ attention towards a tall, pine bookcase in her living room:

“There’s also a lot of things about the Quran, like, not putting anything on top of it… and make sure it’s in a place that’s respected and clean obviously. And so I do that with my main copy… But all these other copies, I can’t have them all, like, on podiums. [laughs] So, I kind of have all my books that are to do with religion, in one spot… And I have the Quran next to the Bible. I’m okay with that.”

Classifying books by genre also applies to shared collections. Dahlia described her home library (which combines her books with her husband’s), as follows:

“We have a library where we actually categorize it by genre. So our Islamic books, there’s sub-genres… like political commentary, identity politics and all that, and then history. And then we have ones which are strictly religious. Like, hadith, and then there’s Qurans in there. And then there’s other ones about women. We’re very serious about [laughs] the genres and the topics, so we do categorize information like that.”

In addition to housing books, Muslim converts’ physical collections and home libraries may include photo albums, which document key places, events, friends, and ways of dressing throughout a person’s conversion process. As January flipped through one of her photo albums, she spoke about how the albums are “kind of chronological.” As she showed me the snapshots, she enthusiastically pointed out her family members and best friends, and recounted what was happening in each photograph. At one point, January was upset to find that some of the photos were missing. In particular, she exclaimed:

“Oh! I wish! If I did have pictures of [name of] Mosque, I would have given you that picture… because you talk about space and your conversion, and I can’t think of a space that better summarizes it than [name of] Mosque… That was the first mosque I went to,

52 The exception to this semi-public collection of religious books is one of Aisha’s favourite versions of the Quran, which sits on her bedside table.
my first experience being Muslim, the first place I felt really like, it just felt a very holy and wonderful place. And, I have no pictures of it! So, Google ‘[name of] Mosque’ in [city], and you will have that picture!”

Digital media can also be organized into folders with the help of file sharing and collaboration software. This was demonstrated by January’s explanation about the scanned articles and online theses and documentaries that she and her friend save in folders such as “Islamic intentions” in their learning group’s Google Drive. Classifying digital documents according to subject-specific folders facilitates information retrieval and sharing. This collaborative activity also involves negotiations about where documents fit, and agreeing to a consistent filing system based on set criteria for inclusion. Rather than a simple organizing process, classifying individual and shared collections is an act of knowledge organization that requires a familiarity with Islamic literature, and may help to instill confidence (or raise questions) about one’s sense of religious identity.53

Regardless of how they may be classified, books and digital documents are not the only resources that Muslim converts use to develop their religious identities and their overall sense of selves. Indeed, Alexandra described the metaphorical “resource box” that she uses to interpret her experiences, as follows:

“As I’ve developed a religious identity… that can be a tool for me to interpret my other experiences… It is sort of this resource box… For how much charity do I need to pay based on my income? Or, what do I do if I missed a prayer?… For that thing, you can go to a rule book. But to interpret what’s going on in the world, or what’s going on in your life… in the end, it’s up to you.”

The above quotation from Alexandra echoes Hermione’s comments about the technical and spiritual elements of practicing Islam (see Chapter Six). As Alexandra explains, answers to legal and doctrinal questions such as making up for prayer or calculating charitable contributions can be found in religious texts, but other questions about everyday religious practice or expression need to be interpreted using a personal “resource box” that contains a variety of tools, including religious affiliation, cultural background, and migration experiences. These tools may not be

53 As Melanie Feinberg observes, classification not only “provides the conceptual infrastructure by which scattered information resources are brought together under a particular interpretive frame and made accessible to others,” but is also a fundamental way that people creatively express themselves since it “conveys a position on the materials we have made available” (Feinberg, 2011).
classified in a systematic way (like books in a library), but they are critical resources all the same.

Categorizing personal libraries and photo albums (on- and offline), referring to resource boxes, and bookmarking websites are some of the ways in which participants think critically not only about designing and developing their personal collections according to their interests and preferences, but also how they interact with their peers and think about their religion (e.g., how Islam relates to other religions, spiritual traditions and internal divisions within Islam, power dynamics and gender relations, media and public perceptions about Islam, and determining authentic sources). Furthermore, these knowledge organization activities are ways of establishing expertise about a previously unfamiliar religion (or at least a religion with which many converts previously had limited personal connection). The role of such organizational and classificatory activities in developing expertise over a subject have been noted elsewhere in information behaviour and personal information management literature, for instance, among American historians (Case, 1991a; Case, 1991b) and library and information science graduate students at a northern European university (Xie et al., 2015).

4 “Deriving knowledge”

The influence of educational institutions on how Muslim converts learn their religion cannot be ignored. Given that all participants completed high school, 12 of 13 completed a bachelor’s degree, and six of 13 completed graduate programs (four additional participants’ graduate degrees were in progress at the time of fieldwork), I was not surprised that participants approached learning about Islam with intellectual rigour. In a sense, participants were skilled information seekers, having been trained to look for and filter through information over the course of their lives as students, and in professional roles such as political campaigners, career counselors, writers, and academics. Partly due to having been recruited through university-affiliated clubs and organizations and through social networks composed of people from primarily middle class backgrounds, for the most part, the women and men who took part in my project represent a particular socioeconomic status. Notably, all participants who completed (or were in the process of completing) postsecondary degrees were based in the social sciences,
humanities, and fine arts, with only one person (Aisha) who completed a bachelor’s degree in commerce, finance, and economics. Many participants attended lecture-style programs, read academic publications, and expressed their trust in the opinions of Muslim scholars. For instance, Aisha mentioned her preference for “talking to someone that I know is really properly studied” about questions related to Islam. Abdullah remarked that it depends on the nature of the question: “I might ask someone who’s just a good religious friend for their advice on the matter, whose judgment I trust… Whereas if I have an Islamic legal question, there’s no way I would ask my friends about that.” Seif described his process of seeking websites that are useful to his personal religious awareness as follows:

“In order to know what kind of information is viable, what kind of information is not viable… For me, it does sort of follow a blueprint that looks awfully familiar with the way I try to learn about other subjects… I have to go online… There are certain websites I trust, and certain ones I don’t. The certain ones that I trust are more people who take the normative tradition seriously.”

Seif’s comments reveal that while “blueprints” for evaluating online sources related to Islam may be similar to assessing online sources about other topics, the perceived trustworthiness of a source is at least partly determined by individual inclinations towards the worldview, tradition, or school of thought that a source or scholar appears to represent.

While Muslim converts may be introduced to Islam through classroom education or through friends at university, they may choose to continue to participate in formal classroom-based programs to pursue their religious education. For example, Kelly explained:

“I like to go to [non-profit Islamic education organization] classes, I love to go to those. I find them so informative, they’re so interesting. And they’re grounded in actual facts of Islam. Like, this is not something that someone might be feeling… It’s actually a factual response that’s guided by a lineage of scholars.”

Kelly’s preference aligns with the convert discussion group I attended, which was led by a shaykh from the mosque and reminded me of an instructional catechism class rather than a conversational support group. The power dynamics between the shaykh as knowledge holder and attendees as knowledge seekers was evident in the way the class was delivered. Like the classes Kelly described, the convert discussion group classes were delivered as factual responses to doctrinal issues (e.g., “four elements of ‘valid repentance’”, “Five General Rules”). Since there was a syllabus for each session and the group met between prayer times, there was limited time
to discuss the emotional aspects of conversion – even if the interest was there. These comments highlight reason, empiricism, and the privileged authority of trained scholars – values that are rooted in the Enlightenment and embedded in academia. They also point to participants’ critical thinking about the quality and credibility of Islamic scholars and online sources.

Critical evaluation applies to both scholarly sources (i.e. documents found in university libraries, academic journal databases, and Google Scholar) and “quasi-academic” sources. As January explained:

“Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir… That kind of stuff, like Zaytuna [Institute] and the Nawawi Institute… which are not universities but… the scholarship’s good and it tends to be more accessible.”

The criteria for evaluating sources may be tacit, as Jennifer suggested when she noted that it is difficult to think of the exact factors we apply when determining relevance and reliability. Jennifer went on to describe how she is skeptical of “popstar shaykhs” and that she much prefers to read works by Muslim academics. Pausing pensively before responding, Jennifer reflected on her assessment techniques as follows:

“Look at how they [authors/scholars] approach things. How they give evidence for what they claim. How they research. For me, it’s very important that a writer, first that they know what they’re talking about, that they have a background in what they claim to be an expert in.”

Since Jennifer’s training is in law and public policy (which are centered around interpreting and presenting evidence and documentation), her perception of the importance of evidence and expertise is not surprising. These information literacy strategies have been cultivated through years (and for some, decades) of education, during which participants learned as students and professionals how to search for and evaluate resources to meet academic and performance standards. The above excerpts demonstrate connections among the information literacy strategies that participants describe, their preferences for formal education (e.g. classes for converts, scholarly sources, qualified teachers) and their education level.
Processes of assessing credibility and relevance may differ among converts who did not graduate from high school. This difference could prove to be fruitful ground for comparative research. As mentioned in the Context chapter, the education level of participants was likely linked to my recruitment efforts – namely, emailing my call for participants to other graduate students, faculty members, and my social and professional networks (including friends and former colleagues who have a graduate education), circulating flyers through university-affiliated centres and organizations, and through the initial group of pilot study participants (who had completed or were in the process of completing master's degrees). These links suggest a cultural influence on Muslim converts from their academic institutions and disciplinary norms, in addition to cultural influences from Muslim communities.

Islamic norms for acquiring religious knowledge should not be discounted. Indeed, information practices developed in secular and religious settings are mutually constitutive. For instance, Ruqayyah’s husband noted how he has recently become more aware about “a methodology in which you can derive knowledge” to understand Islam. His comments suggest that in addition to secular educational institutions, there are also religiously embedded strategies for verifying the authenticity of literature. One example of these religiously embedded strategies is referring (as Aisha did) to “real sources… like Sahih Bukhari” that are considered as “really strong hadith.” Aisha’s allusion to “real” and “strong” sources, and statements such as “Islam will say” (e.g. when citing teachings about etiquette and women praying in the mosque) reflects a familiarity with prevalent attitudes held by Muslim peers, religious leaders, and teachers about the authenticity of certain texts, without needing to quote specific sayings. As Abdullah pointed out when he described giving khutbah:

“Let’s say I quote a hadith and that hadith has some weakness in it… They don’t know, academically, what’s the difference between a strong and a weak hadith besides the fact that it’s called ‘strong hadith’ or ‘weak hadith’.”

Abdullah’s comments hint at his own expertise in Islamic law, and suggest that a deep, academic understanding of the strength of various hadith is not required for a person to demonstrate that they have a basic awareness that this practice of verification exists. Additionally, Rachel

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54 One of the main challenges in conducting such comparative research is that most statistics on religious affiliation in North America (from census data and public opinion surveys) are not comprehensive, nor do they typically track religious change or the education levels of religious adherents.
mentioned her fascination with and aspiration to learn more about “hadith science” – a systematic way of grading the reliability or “soundness” of hadith. Seif added that the scholarship on “weed[ing] out fake hadith to real ones” is “formidable” and that he is personally not qualified to “check whether or not a hadith is trustworthy.” The issue of verifying hadith also arose at the convert discussion group I attended. During one meeting, the shaykh explained the different sources of law and what he described as the “detailed and meticulous” process of verifying information collected in hadith. At a subsequent meeting, one woman asked about a passage she accessed on her smartphone, seeking clarification on the question, “it’s in Bukhari, so it’s valid?” In response, the shaykh confirmed the validity of the passage and continued with the discussion. Hadith verification illustrates the importance of evaluation strategies and accepted norms for acquiring religious knowledge that converts learn by being socialized into their new religion.

5  Crisis of authority

Conversion to Islam is affected not only by traditions of hadith verification and other norms of religious learning, but also by decisions about where to turn to access educated, qualified teachers. When I asked Seif about his decision-making process to select useful resources, he responded as follows:

“What to seek out, or what to read, who to talk to, what qualifications a shaykh needs to have…The religion informs all of that in the first place…It’s not like, you Google whatever you want and you see what comes up. And you just decide, okay this one’s good, that one’s bad…It’s still incumbent on people to seek out people who have knowledge… and who have studied with proper shaykhs.”

Another interview excerpt, from Alexandra, captures a similar concern with avoiding overly simplified responses from people who are unqualified to offer spiritual guidance (in this case in online forums):

“You start having these standards. I’m not gonna read something by a person who can’t even spell the answer properly. I’m gonna go look for a nice site that has a nice community of answers, that explains a source and discusses them, that considers different possibilities and also different contexts.”

Seif’s and Alexandra’s comments point to the influence of religious authorities on how Muslim converts understand their religion. Seif emphasized how religious teachers should be
knowledgeable and properly educated, while Alexandra described the qualities she looks for in online responses from experts (namely, proper spelling, good manners, and a consideration of how the response might be interpreted according to different situations). Their comments are especially timely given the larger discussion that is happening about a “crisis of authority” in Islam. As Nadia Khan writes:

“Access to classic sources online means American Muslims may forego visiting the local **imam**; some dispute the **ulamas’** legal opinions and offer alternative interpretations of **Sharia** online. The ability to engage in 'do it yourself' jurisprudence has led to a rise in self-appointed charismatic amateur Islam experts who lack formal religious training but publish interpretations online, drawing not only from classical texts but also from their own experiences” (Khan, 2014, p. 379).

The increasing online presence of so-called “amateur Islam experts,” combined with the absence of a central religious authority and the diversity of opinions, ideas, cultural backgrounds and personal experiences in Muslim communities (especially in large metropolitan areas such as the GTA), complicates Muslim converts’ process of deciphering between trustworthy, credible religious authorities and less reliable sources. 55 As Abdullah explained:

“There’s access to information, and there’s also suspicion of authority as a result. Because it’s like, okay, well I can look stuff up myself. And I can figure this out on my own.”

Seif also elaborated on this issue, stating that: “The crisis within Islam is a crisis of information... It’s a crisis of knowledge, and it’s ultimately a crisis of authority.” He went on to comment on how diverse theological opinions and ethnic identities are implicated in this crisis, as follows:

“There’s no pope to tell you what to do... The overall heterogeneity of the Muslim community – not just theologically, but ethnically, racially – yeah, these are often sources of a problem. Not just when it comes to attaining information. But I mean, these things contribute sometimes to just basic divisions.”

The interview excerpts above speak to the complexity of this crisis of authority, which was frequently referenced by participants. Abdullah identified a link between the proliferation of online information about Islam and widespread suspicion of authority figures. Seif reflected on the way in which the lack of a global religious leader in Islam, combined with the variety of ethnic and racial identities and theological perspectives represented by Muslims, can create

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55 At least, in Sunni Islam (see Šisler, 2011).
confusion and internal disagreements. Their observations echo literature on the relationship between religious authority and digital media (see Campbell, 2013; Šisler, 2011; Šisler, 2006). Moreover, it is noteworthy that public sources understood to be trustworthy are predominantly male. One need only glance at convention programs which feature “popstar shaykhs” such as Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir, Suhaib Webb, and Nouman Ali Khan, or consider controversies such as Amina Wadud’s (2005) woman-led prayer to notice that the voices of Muslim women leaders and scholars remain peripheral when it comes to showcasing perspectives that are widely perceived as authoritative.

Relatedly, Muslim converts may be uncomfortable with uncritically accepting “expert” opinions from revered religious leaders and teachers, rather than actively engaging with texts and considering different opinions. For instance, Liam expressed his wariness about the hierarchy involved when an imam delivers an interpretation as “the educated one,” and about uncritical reverence for religious leaders and teachers. Similarly, Rachel noted that “the idea of a spiritual hierarchy is something I never really connected with.” While Liam formally converted at his wife’s family’s mosque and does not regularly practice his adopted religion, Rachel frequently attends a mosque where she feels comfortable and part of a community that aligns with her beliefs and values. Despite these divergent experiences, Liam and Rachel both commented on their uneasiness about placing a higher value on expert opinions over a layperson’s critical interpretation of religious texts. These experiences of valuing information and advice that accessible, trusted non-experts provide, over information that trained teachers, librarians, and others in positions of authority offer have been similarly observed among other groups, including undergraduate students and sexual assault survivors (Gross & Latham, 2011; Skinner & Gross, 2017). Although the diversity among Muslim communities in the GTA and the increased volume of accessible online resources may create a sense of confusion about religious authority, these factors also present opportunities for Muslim converts to learn from and share a multitude of interpretations.
“We have our own knowledge, but also ideas that are imposed on us”

The crisis of authority discussed above illustrates the importance of other people and communities to learn, answer questions, and find out where to look to discover more about Islam. It also reflects the tendency towards trusting interpersonal information sources, which was discussed earlier (in Chapter Six, section 1). As she explained her timeline drawing during our second interview, Jennifer articulated her insights about the two-dimensional nature of faith, as follows: “We have our own knowledge and consciousness, but also the ideas that are imposed on us.” Jennifer’s comments reveal how religious experiences cannot be understood by merely focusing on the individual. Indeed, theories of conversion recognize the socialization process of neophytes “becoming members” (Blasi, 2009) of faith communities by learning new vocabularies, lifestyles, and moral systems to gain access to peers who can continuously offer advice about rituals and customs and affirm converts’ religious selves (Bourque, 2006; Köse, 1994; Moosavi, 2012; Rambo, 1999).

Widespread reliance on the internet for information contributes to the ways in which Muslim converts learn about their religion. In addition to the “un-mosqued” trend and skepticism or confusion about religious authority, Muslim converts often investigate religious questions on their own, starting with a simple Google search.56 When discussing his perception of how non-Muslim North Americans tend to learn, Seif referred to this phenomenon as “autodidactic”:

“Especially with the internet, you’re more of an autodidact… you go and you read some reports, or you watch some videos or documentary… And the entire education system – for historic reasons – it encourages sort of like a free-flowing information gathering. With Islam, everybody tries to do that. Especially after 9/11, everybody is like, ‘Okay, I gotta figure out how this religion works. I gotta collect information on this religion’.”

Later in our conversation, Seif acknowledged that this autodidactic way of seeking information can be effective for some subjects, especially for journalists working in a deadline-driven

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56 It is worth comparing such un-mosqued and autodidactic experiences with survey data which reported that Muslims in Canada “are most likely to look for religious guidance from local Muslim organizations or mosques (22%), one’s own family (11%) or the local imam or sheik (10%), followed by national Muslim organizations and the Quran” (Environics, 2016, p. 19). Additionally, only 1% of respondents “mentioned religious leaders outside of Canada,” and 42% of respondents said that “they look nowhere in particular for guidance as a Muslim” (ibid.).
environment. However, he argued that it is inadequate for developing a deep understanding of a complex subject such as Islam.

The individualistic character of searching for information related to Islam—and, relatedly, becoming knowledgeable about Islamic history, law, politics, and social relations—in a North American context was also raised by other participants. Dahlia talked about listening to audio courses on her phone and iPod, and Hermione recounted how during her time living alone while she was studying for her master’s degree in another province, she “spent a lot of time learning more about Islam. I read a lot of books, I watched a lot of YouTube videos, listened to podcasts.” In both of these examples—along with Seif’s description of autodidactic learning about religion in North America—libraries and librarians are seldom mentioned. On this point, January commented on her (lack of) interactions with librarians as follows:

“Sometimes, I’ll ask librarians, like, ‘How do you use the system?’ or where a book is. But when it comes to readings and stuff, no I generally don’t really talk to librarians… And we have an Islamic Studies librarian too, so I don’t know why.”

This limited use of libraries has possible implications for theological librarians who develop collections and provide research services to chaplains and others who offer spiritual care for converts. Without clear recognition of the value that libraries and librarians provide to religious leaders and adherents (at any stage of their spiritual life), independent learning about religion (i.e. religious literacy) through media such as podcasts and online videos will continue to predominate.

Despite these individualized efforts to search for information, it is important to consider the impact of networking, community involvement, and mentorship on Muslim converts’ exposure to Islam and their processes of religious identity formation. For example, Alexandra distinguished between complex historical or theological questions that require reading on the subject and speaking to an expert, and “community questions” that can be answered in a few minutes, such as figuring out the timing of religious holidays, which can be resolved through “networking.” While fellow Muslims can be helpful to answer questions concerning daily life, Aisha pointed out that when it comes to contested issues such as women wearing hijab, “people always will sort of point you in different directions.” Not only is such conflicting advice
confusing, but receiving various opinions and critiques can feel overwhelming. Jennifer compared her experience in her native country with Canada as follows:

“Before I felt I was always an individual meeting other individuals, and here all of a sudden I was like a teeny little piece in a huge community, which I felt was suffocating me with their views and kind of demanding my compliance. And that’s what really makes me anxious, and not very happy about it.”

Jennifer’s comments reflect her visual depiction of the “ideas imposed on us” in her timeline drawing. They also reveal the intense emotional distress that peer judgments can produce. Alexandra made a similar observation, stating that:

“The popular saying among converts is, ‘Thank God I met Islam before I met Muslims’… Sometimes people alienate you whereas you were drawn to something larger and more spiritual, and people alienate you with nasty behaviour or pressure, or just bad approaches to etiquette of advising someone else.”

In the above interview excerpt, Alexandra speaks to the sense of alienation that can derive from receiving unsolicited (or even solicited) advice delivered in an inconsiderate manner. What Alexandra refers to as “having to encounter the community” suggests that conversion processes combine individual curiosity and learning about Islam with community engagement, which can be perceived as having positive and negative effects. Alexandra and Jennifer both observe that relating to Muslim peers is central to developing their religious identities, yet it can be emotionally difficult.

Nonetheless, the importance of friends, family, and community members for social support, mentoring, spiritual guidance, and religious information literacy is key to the conversion process. Even Alexandra, who acknowledged the challenges of becoming part of a Muslim community, wrote about the support she has received throughout her conversion in her pilot study journal:

“I cannot imagine my transition into Islam without the friends & role models (both near and far) that I could turn to or follow the example of. It’s this immediate community that provides daily reinforcement and reminder of one’s priorities, values and identity as a Muslim.”

Other participants also elaborated on their connections with Muslim peers for support and sharing ideas. For example, when I asked Aisha how she found out about the religious education courses she has attended, she responded that “it was through someone that I met at one of my convert groups.” She added that forming a sort of “club of converts” after “meeting my first
convert friends that were born and raised in Canada… was just a breath of fresh air.” This kind of social support was similarly raised by January, who spoke about how some of the first Muslim friends she made upon moving to the city where she attended university for her bachelor’s degree “are still my really good friends.” January recounted that when she started going to mosque events and weddings for community members, these friends “were like my rocks” to help her feel included in the community. January, Aisha, and several other women participants noted how social support from other women Muslims was critical particularly in the early stages of their conversions. Yet despite acknowledging that spaces are typically segregated by gender for prayer and large events, they also made references to attending religious education classes and convert support groups that were held in mixed company and led by male presenters. This suggests a possible distinction between informal learning\(^{57}\) and social interaction among Muslim peers who share the same gender identity, and formal learning\(^{58}\) situations in which women and men (albeit, often sitting in separate designated sections) learn from (often, male) teachers in positions of authority.

Having a supportive peer network is not only helpful for social and emotional reasons; it also allows converts to develop the ways in which they critically evaluate and analyze information. As Jennifer pointed out:

“As you become more secure in your own faith, and more self-assured, you don’t depend on other people’s acceptance anymore. So you don’t try to please others, but you develop your own ideas and in addition you learn, and so you question things as well. And you develop your own interpretations.”

Jennifer’s comments suggest that social support is a foundation for developing critical insights about Islam, and for developing a more self-confident religious identity in the process. This self-confidence may also allow converts to perceive themselves as an authority for newer Muslims. On a related note of self-awareness and the ability to appreciate nuance, Ruqayyah spoke about the importance of being “open to new and different resources.” She contrasted this open-

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\(^{57}\) I.e., learning that happens in the course of daily life with “little deliberately planned teaching” (Lave, 1982, p. 182), which falls outside of the “normative model for education” (Lave, 1982, p. 181). This dichotomy is not without its faults (e.g., Lave notes its reductive, “school-centric, simplified” [1982, p. 185] nature), but is useful here to point out some of the gendered patterns of learning that I observed during fieldwork.

\(^{58}\) I.e., the “normative model for education” (Lave, 1982, p. 181), in which teachers transmit culture through a structured curriculum of activities – namely, reading, writing, and arithmetic – and students learn through listening, memorization, and practicing those tasks (Lave, 1982).
mindedness to a Salafi mosque she used to attend, where the book collection housed in the
mosque’s bookstore reflects “a certain agenda, will always have the same interpretation.” As
Hermione similarly pointed out with reference to another group, “people that have a certain
interpretation, they don’t even mention that another option is available.”

The distinction between literal and interpretive approaches to reading and evaluating texts –
whether the Quran, hadith, commentaries, course materials, or online content – is an important
issue for Muslim converts who describe the evolution of their understanding of Islam as directly
linked to adopting a more nuanced perspective. The idea that Muslims should use independent
reasoning to produce different interpretations, and that a difference of opinion is accepted by
tradition was also raised by participants. For instance, Seif argued that, “scholars acknowledge
each other’s differences, and there’s no one way of doing things, everything is in constant
debate.” Dahlia described her learning process as follows:

“As time went on, I learned to appreciate nuance. I learned that there was difference of
opinions among well-respected scholars within my tradition that I follow. And so I
became less dogmatic, more flexible.”

Ruqayyah explained how her husband’s role as a kind of devil’s advocate helped her to think
critically about her decisions. As she described:

“It’s not just the one interpretation they want you to have, you’re able to see the
difference of opinion… Even when I was veiled [wearing niqab], he would say, ‘Oh, why
are you wearing it?’ Get me to think about it. He would never say, ‘Don’t wear it,’ or not.
It was my decision.”

When I spoke with Ruqayyah’s husband, he also recalled how he encouraged Ruqayyah to
practice critical thinking:

“I would ask her, ‘Why are you wearing it?’ ‘What is the evidence for wearing it? How
are you so sure that’s what you’re supposed to be doing? Let alone what you’re supposed
to be doing in your context.’… It’s not just, you read the text and then you apply it… If
you use the text as a reference to understand your experience, you can then come to an
understanding of what the text is trying to convey.”

At a convert discussion group meeting, the shaykh said that scholars have different views on a
lot of issues, and while we can educate or “enlighten” people if we are confident about a
particular practice, there is no need to fight over someone else’s opinion or way of practicing
their faith. The shaykh’s comments reflect a widespread attitude about how Islam encourages a
“difference of opinion” – a term which was invoked by many participants who describe themselves as representing divergent schools of thought, traditions, and cultural backgrounds.

Aligned with the notion that conversion is a continuous process, learning from trusted friends and scholars is something that happens on an ongoing basis – not simply as a matter of introduction to Islam. Seif suggested that, “if there’s not that kind of communal network, then it becomes very difficult for people to learn the religion.” In addition to a supportive community, Hermione added that she “needed women Muslims, I needed people who were in academia and were Muslim” to find out “what is that going to be like for me?” Hermione’s comments echo similar statements made by Dahlia, Jennifer and January about seeking or at least aspiring to have Muslim women teachers and mentors (even if those women teach and mentor through their written works rather than face-to-face meetings). Hermione’s and Seif’s comments reveal that in addition to information practices such as independent reading, and sharing or presenting resources and recommendations, Muslim converts may find it helpful to have guides and mentors in their lives, as they develop their understanding of Islam and what it means to them to be Muslim. Given their perceived expertise about Islam and lived experiences as Muslims, mentors can be effective navigators in helping converts sift through the vast amounts of information related to their religion. By pointing to the resources they would recommend, mentors helped to reduce the sense of information overload that often accompanies information seeking on one’s own. At the same time, when participants spoke about mentors, they referred to their personal connections to them as friends and neighbours, rather than authority figures who were admired from a distance. Despite several participants expressing a need for mentors in their lives, no one talked about an ongoing, long-term mentorship relationship – either with themselves in the role of mentor or as mentees. A few participants commented on how such mentors helped them at particular times in their lives, and that they eventually dropped out of their lives as friendships dissolved or as people moved away. Dahlia described her aspiration to have regular access to a spiritual teacher and guide as follows:

“I had this romantic notion that I’d find a teacher who would be there and guide me through all of this existential stuff. And she’d be close in proximity, close spiritually.”

The idea of exchanging information and transmitting knowledge orally through direct, one-on-one teaching has been an established and revered practice for centuries – especially in Islam’s
mystical traditions (Werbner, 2006). Since Dahlia described herself as “Sufi-oriented,” her aspiration for an intellectually and spiritually intimate relationship with a spiritual guide is not surprising. Other participants similarly discussed human guides as sources of information. For instance, Abdullah talked about “finding the right kind of people who can relate to your situation and help you through your difficulties.” At the sisters iftar, the host and one of her friends emphasized the importance of listening to teachers and shaykhs, albeit with a critical mindset to check textual references rather than accepting their claims at face value. These examples indicate that trusted interpersonal sources play an important role in guiding and supporting Muslim converts in finding, evaluating, and exchanging information at various points throughout their conversion process.

7 Sifting to meet the “person behind each text”

Muslim converts’ decisions about which books to read, courses to take, and opinions to agree or contend with are based on perceptions about the reliability, relevance, and trustworthiness of sources. When I asked participants about the evaluation criteria they apply in their decision-making, they referred to evidence presented, the balanced or biased nature of arguments, and the author/speaker’s reputation. For example, Alexandra wrote in her pilot study journal that sources should display: “sound logic, mature/professional methodology and presentation (not an opinionated, anonymous forum post).” Other participants similarly commented on the notion that sources should articulate arguments carefully with support for their claims. On two occasions at the convert discussion group, the shaykh talked about the importance of evidence (namely, the hadith/Sunnah and Quran) for making decisions about religious practices such as prayer. He also emphasized that he always makes efforts to support claims with evidence from verses, including their references in brackets in the handout provided to the group. January noted that she and her collaborator on the halaqa initiative “want to have good scholarship and… hard evidence. Because if people critique it, you have to be like, ‘Well, this is based on this book.’” The idea of having evidence to support claims is central in both Islamic jurisprudence and the secular, Canadian education system. In response to my question about organizing online content, Abdullah alluded to this educational training as follows:
“In the past, I might read something and I’d be like, ‘Oh yeah, that sounds really good.’ And then just go with that… But as you grow intellectually, I look at things more critically and more contextually.”

Jennifer connected critical awareness to education and self-confidence in her spirituality, whereas Abdullah explicitly linked the process of questioning the content and context of sources to his studies of Islamic law, theology, and history. In all of the above examples, participants exercised their individual judgment.

Such judgment calls become even more challenging when faced with the task of verifying the content of translated books. As Rachel pointed out, when I asked her about how she decides which translations are reliable:

“For now the translation [of the Quran] that I do have is one that’s been approved by the religious councils in Saudi Arabia. And it’s kind of seen as one of the most reliable English translations… What I like about my translation is it’s filled with footnotes that explain the translator’s decision-making in translating certain words, certain ways.”

Rachel’s response suggests that there are two main factors in selecting a translated text: verification by experts (or peer approval about the translation’s reliability), and the translator’s transparency about linguistic decisions.

On the topic of influence, peer Muslims are important to help filter through seemingly factually accurate sources. As Alexandra wrote in her pilot study journal:

“Books on Islam by Bernard Lewis are considered by most Muslims as heavily Orientalist, or that a particular book ‘on Islam’ from South Asia is widely known in that region as full of hearsay and inaccuracies.”

Alexandra’s comments point to how her peers advised her about non-Muslim authors to avoid reading (or at least be cautious about) when learning about Islam. At the same time, in the following statement, Alexandra humourously described how she is discerning about the sources of advice she receives:

“I would never just walk into a mosque and stop the first person who happens to be sitting there and be like, ‘Hey uncle, can you answer this question for me?’ ‘Cause I don’t even know who that person is. They’re just sitting there, they have no credentials.”
Other participants similarly talked about following trusted peers (rather than random Muslim community members) to find reliable resources. For instance, Olivier described his mentorship as follows:

“When I had this mentor, because she had read and immersed herself in things like Sufism and Islamic philosophy for years. I mean she had a huge personal library at home. And so, there was a certain trust that I had towards that. Even if she doesn’t have a university degree, and she did not study with Islamic scholars.”

Olivier’s comments reflect how a mentor’s formal education and qualifications may matter less than long-term personal investigations of Islamic spiritual traditions and philosophy, when it comes to trusting them to recommend reliable materials and provide spiritual support. It is also worth noting that unlike the majority of authority figures who take centre stage at mainstream Islamic conventions, courses, and Friday prayers who present as male, Olivier’s mentor is a woman. Conversely, Alexandra spoke about prioritizing published information over canvassing advice from a mentor to answer complicated questions. As she recounted:

“I was interested to see if there was any discussion on the question of the status of slavery in Islam… I remember that this scholar had a book on it, about the history of black suffering and Islam… I’m gonna read that book and see if that answers my question. And if that doesn’t answer it, then I’m gonna talk to somebody.”

Alexandra’s response highlights similar attitudes expressed above by other participants about needing to have concrete (i.e. published, documented, recorded) evidence upon which to base claims and formulate arguments and opinions about issues related to Muslim religious identity. Such attitudes about the need for published documents to make decisions and form opinions have been observed in other contexts, including professional theatre companies, midwifery clinics, and engaging with online reference materials (Davies & McKenzie, 2004; Gorichanaz, 2016b).

In addition to being reliable, information must be personally relevant. As Hermione said, “It’s not relevant to me to go to [Muslim educational organization] and learn about Hanafi law. I don’t care about Hanafi law. Great stuff, but not for me.” While she recognizes the potential legitimacy of one school of Islamic law for other Muslims, Hermione points to personal relevance as an important factor in deciding where to go for religious education. In part, personal relevance stems from contextualizing materials according to the geopolitical and cultural setting at hand. As Alexandra described in her pilot study journal, “awareness of Western/North American
context” is one of the main criteria she applies to choose a source to read or listen to. Similarly, when I asked Ruqayyah about mosques that have resonated with her, she emphasized the importance of considering the historical context of the audience to form interpretations:

“Yes, there’s an ayah, but we also need to take into consideration the context. And the people. And I feel like they weren’t taking into consideration our western context a lot of times. So that’s one of the main reasons why I left that group.”

The importance of contextualization applies to written materials and oral presentations. As Dahlia explained, with reference to rarely attending the mosque:

“The teachers – if they speak English – they don’t speak in a way I can relate, and it just doesn’t feel totally relevant to me sometimes the way they speak, and the things they speak about, it’s not relevant to the young people’s lives here.”

Dahlia’s comments echo the un-mosqued trend, and reveal how sermons and religious education classes must be mindful of the congregation’s concerns, backgrounds, and social context in order to stay relevant. During our second interview, Alexandra added that although she expects lecturers on Islamic law to have the requisite subject area credentials, their regional background (e.g. Europe, North America, North Africa, etc.) matters less than “what the concerns are, and how the concerns are addressed, and what the priorities are.”

On the issue of context, Muslim converts also filter through lenses of authors’ or presenter’s theological, political, and cultural leanings. Hermione raised this issue with reference to Shia resources, which she claimed are inherently linked to political issues of succession and authority. Additionally, Dahlia acknowledged that her own leanings affect how she reads and analyzes various materials. In response to my question about how her Sufi orientation informs the way she evaluates resources, Dahlia stated:

“My Sufi outlook would always make me have a certain filter. Like I’m more skeptical to accept things that seem very conservative, ‘cause I know that it might be coming from a certain place that I’m no longer living.”

Similarly, in her pilot study journal, Alexandra wrote about the importance of sources’ compatibility with her perspective, as follows:

“I am more likely to respond to legal opinions of scholars who actively speak about women’s rights, the environment, and social justice, because their stated priorities reflect mine, [and] not being associated with organizations I don’t endorse.”
In addition to content of a sermon, interpretation, or legal opinion being relevant to a person’s context and compatible with their concerns, another element that Muslim converts assess is the author/speaker’s credentials to deliver content. As Abdullah explained:

“It’s not about finding information, it’s about finding the right kind of people who can relate to your situation and help you through your difficulties… The real challenge is to find qualified people… [who] have some knowledge of the religion.”

As someone who studied Islam in the Middle East and who regularly gives sermons and teaches religious education classes in his local community, Abdullah would presumably fall into this category as someone who is qualified to speak about Islam – even to “born” Muslims. Dahlia referred to such qualifications as “a license to teach” and noted the two key questions she asks about the person transmitting “traditional Islamic knowledge”: “What’s their scholarly background? Who have they learned from?” Olivier’s additions to the list of qualifications – “well-studied, well-liked, well-respected” – also allude to the teacher’s scholarly background and reputation in the community.

It is equally important to be aware of the types of scholars, speakers, and religious leaders to avoid approaching for spiritual guidance. For example, Jennifer found “popstar shaykhs” to be untrustworthy, and Kelly cautioned against seeking advice from the archetypical “Imam Anything Goes,” who will “just tell you whatever, because that’s how he feels on that particular day.” Participants also expressed an awareness of sources with dubious credibility. For instance, when I asked January how she would go about establishing what is a credible source, she responded as follows:

“I look at the author. What their position is, and what kind of school they’re coming from. If it’s like, a personal blog, I tend to be a little bit suspicious of it. Not necessarily saying it’s not true or legitimate, but it’s harder to verify. I tend to treat it as when you’re writing a research paper. You look at, is it peer-reviewed? What kind of job does this person have? What’s their occupation, are they an expert in this field.”

The comments above indicate that credentials are often interpreted as a person’s scholarly background, or their elevated status within a community, and are not necessarily tied to their gender. (This interpretation was especially apparent among the participants in my project, since they were, overall, well-educated and trained in information literacy practices such as the peer-review process.) Moreover, prestigious scholars/leaders may claim to have more authority, or
can be perceived (especially by new Muslims) to have more authority than lesser known scholars/leaders.

Muslim converts also take into account cues and character traits that indicate the author/speaker’s trustworthiness and authenticity. For instance, Alexandra described the following example of negative “cues” that could reflect the character of the “person behind each text”:

“If an article is very hostile… and also careless language. Like throwing around terms, like, unbeliever and sin… I’m not gonna take this article at face value because this person is not very considerate, to whoever the audience might be. And very condemning and very reactionary.”

Alexandra went on to contrast these negative cues with more positive features, such as humour. As she explained:

“Good sources tend to… have a slightly lightheartedness about it… Like, ‘Oh, you’re asking this question, wow, what’s up.’ But then the answer would still be serious. But they would make sure that the person is comfortable.”

As Aisha pointed out, another person’s character is especially important for developing mutual trust and respect “in the beginning [of the conversion process] where it’s just all conversations and it’s all hearsay, and it’s, ‘I like this person and I like how they treat me, and so I’m going to go on what whoever taught them’.”

Muslim converts’ decisions about the relevance, authenticity, and trustworthiness of published and unpublished materials are related to the crisis of authority in Islam. As part of the process of navigating a new social world and their place within it, they filter through vast amounts of online content generated from myriad authors, sources, and places, and with various agendas informing the displayed and distributed messages. These decisions to assess and filter information are further complicated by a political climate in which issues of surveillance and national security are interwoven with Islamophobic attitudes and consequent racial profiling (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2013; Kanji, 2016b; Moosavi, 2014). For the Muslim converts I spoke with, evaluating information is a critical part of their conversion experiences – not simply a matter of choosing one book or website over another. As Aisha explained in her pilot study
journal, “there is a lot of incorrect information out there that converts need to sift their way through and that is part of our test.”

Chapter Summary

By situating participants’ experiences within the theme of authority, this chapter explored how conversion involves perceptions about who is allowed to speak for Islam, socially mediated information exchange, and verifying the authenticity of religious records such as hadith. The chapter described how online sources and digital platforms play an important part in learning about Islam, connecting with peers and the public, and defining one’s sense of religious self – even as they require converts to filter through content to locate the author/speaker’s underlying motivations. It also reflected on the impact of institutional norms (religious and secular) on the ways in which Muslim converts build their understandings of Islam and of their own religious identities. Finally, it discussed awareness of a “crisis of authority” in Islam, and how this crisis complicates how newcomers to the faith articulate scholars’ and leaders’ trustworthiness and credentials. By attending to how Muslim converts in the Toronto area evaluate resources in their daily lives, the chapter built upon the previous chapter; rather than seeing evaluation merely as a step that follows information seeking, it reveals seeking and evaluation as integrated and mutually informative practices.
Chapter 8
Expression and Exchange

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on the interconnected themes of expression and exchange. Expression is a way of articulating identities, beliefs, and commitments according to different settings, while exchange refers to interactions which facilitate the mutual sharing of ideas, norms, opinions, and assumptions. As reflected in the preceding findings chapters, decision-making happens at each step in Muslim converts’ processes of coming to know about Islam and how to present themselves to the world around them. This chapter features excerpts about self-presentation and a sort of religious “coming out,” including an exploration of the gendered nature of aesthetic decisions and anxieties around being publicly visible as Muslim. Additionally, it considers the conversations and other forms of information sharing that are affected by the global political climate. Finally, this chapter explores participants’ attitudes about and experiences of belonging to the broader Muslim community – and how this belonging is impacted by the un-mosqued trend and gender-specific spaces.

1 Creative works and teaching

Creative pursuits are another important feature of Muslim converts’ information practices. For example, Dahlia spoke about producing a documentary film about Muslim women scholars; Ruqayyah explained how making crafts, baking, and doing calligraphy in homeschool helped introduce her older children to Ramadan; and January and Abdullah talked about writing and giving khutbah at local mosques. Alexandra animatedly described one of her printmaking projects, as follows:

“I made a series of prints… sort of vaguely referencing the Soviet poster aesthetic… But they featured like, these Muslim characters… I kind of wanted to play on that same idea that, oh, people fear the Muslims, and they would see these posters of these happy children, these happy women in headscarves carrying red flags and with black Arabic writing. And they would think, ‘Oh my God! These people are scary.’ And I was just trying to be like, ‘Hey look, they’re just happy, this just means unity and people are just waving some happy flags.’”
For Alexandra, printmaking offers a medium through which to explore not only her Muslim identity, but also her identity as an immigrant from Eastern Europe – in addition to her artistic practice and perceptions about Muslims in North America. By sharing her ideas through her artwork, Alexandra publicly challenges widespread stereotypes about Muslims as a group to be feared. Moreover, in the process of producing a visual resource, Alexandra articulates what it means to her to be Muslim in contemporary North America. These excerpts display the important role of creating materials/publishing information within profound experiences such as conversion. While this kind of information practice is not widely addressed in information behaviour literature, Anders Hektor’s model of everyday life information behaviour (which built upon existing theories by Taylor [1991], Ellis [1989], Kuhlthau [1991], and Wilson [1981]) identified “dressing” as an activity characterized by “the act of packing information in symbols, signs and images to make public and share with others” (Hektor, 2001, p. 87). More recently, Hailey Siracky’s exploratory ethnography of spiritual journals written by Catholic youth expanded on Hektor’s notion of “dressing,” observing that journals are an example of a “private repository” (Hektor, 2001, p. 87) of drawings, coded messages, and symbolic illustrations (Siracky, 2013). Outside of a religious context, these kinds of activities are also reflected in the idiosyncratically-organized recipe collections and culinary binders produced by gourmet cooks (Hartel, 2007; Hartel, 2010), and among liberal arts hobbyists who balance their projects between a dedication to seeking information and being “prolific producers of information” (Hartel, 2014, p. 946). Despite the significance of such creative and productive activities for identity formation and learning among liberal arts hobbyists, gourmet cooks, and religious adherents, these activities have been largely overlooked in information behaviour scholarship, in favour of a continued, library-oriented emphasis on information needs, looking for resources (i.e. information seeking) and assessing its value and credibility (i.e. information literacy).

Islam has a rich history of scholarly and aesthetic traditions, which shaped future generations of Muslim philosophers, poets, teachers, and artists (e.g., Avicenna, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Arabi, Rumi, Al-Ghazali, Rabi’a al-Adawiyya). During my time visiting local Muslim organizations and speaking with converts who participated in my project, I noticed a widespread emphasis on developing one’s own knowledge and sharing it with others. For many participants, their
involvement in creative endeavours and teaching is a key part of daily life, and it informs how they think about Islam and express who they are as Muslims. From sketching and film production, to writing for student association magazines and national newspapers, to preparing and presenting khutbah, participants engaged in a form of information sharing that is rarely acknowledged in LIS literature: creative pursuits. These creative endeavours indicate that learning to be and present oneself as Muslim happens through active participation and “enculturation” to social communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). It is through learning the social norms and values embedded in a community of practice and articulating how one’s own beliefs, political views, opinions, and life experiences relate to those norms and values that Muslim converts construct their identities. Creative and artistic pursuits are one important avenue for this articulation.

2 Da’wah: Information sharing as invitation

Another way of sharing information about Islam is through da’wah (translated from Arabic as “to invite” or “to summon,” and widely interpreted by Muslims as the practice of evangelizing about Islam as a way of inviting people to submit to faith in Allah). While visiting mosques and attending conventions, I noticed various materials geared toward new Muslims and those interested in learning more about Islam. As I described in my fieldnotes about a visit to a local mosque for a discussion group for Muslim converts:

“I browsed through some brochures on an inset counter at the back of the sisters’ prayer space, took two flyers (one for an upcoming convention on the lives of the Prophets and another for a seminar on getting married), then followed the lead of a young woman who had come for another class who sat on the floor behind the women who were praying.”

I also observed da’wah resources at a large convention which catered to young North American Muslims. In my fieldnotes, I reflected on the following interaction that took place in the convention’s “bazaar” (an exhibition space featuring hundreds of display booths for clothing,

59 Exceptions to limited attention to creative pursuits in LIS literature include studies of gourmet cooks and liberal arts hobbyists (Hartel, 2010; Hartel, 2007; Hartel, 2014), music information seeking behaviour (Lavranos et al., 2015), and information behaviour among visual artists (Hemmig, 2008).

60 Poston, 1992, pp. 3-4.
jewellery, and greeting card vendors; educational institutes; associations offering social and religious services; and a large prayer area):

“I noticed a booth displaying books called ‘New Muslim Guide,’ hosted by [an international Islamic educational institute]. I started flipping through one of the books, and a young man wearing a black button-down shirt and black pants explained that the guides included ‘all you need to know’ about fasting, prayer, etc. for new Muslims.”

This man’s comment about how a small instructional book could include everything a new Muslim might need to know about practices as complex and contested as fasting and prayer prompted me to think about how interview participants described their discomfort and even outright anger at *da‘wah* approaches that rely on public proselytization and simplified brochures and pamphlets. For instance, Jennifer voiced her frustration about such resources:

“Every corner, you get these, pamphlets, that are a crime, in my opinion… It’s being so simplified and diminished, and the bad thing is it’s not done by people who want to hurt Islam, it’s done by Muslims… And people are so gullible… they just pick it up and say, ‘Oh, it’s a book, it must be true. Because it’s written in a book.’”

Not only do Jennifer’s comments reflect a strong opposition to pamphlet-based, public *da‘wah*, they also reveal her critical thinking and information literacy skills that have been cultivated through her graduate education. Unlike others who may be more willing to believe in the content included in printed pamphlets, Jennifer’s comments suggest a preference for resources that have undergone a more rigorous research and editorial review process.

Instead of supporting overly simplified and often aggressive techniques for sharing information about Islam, Muslim converts often prefer to demonstrate *da‘wah* through less obvious means, such as displaying good character traits (e.g., kindness, compassion, tolerance, peace, generosity, charity, hospitality). As Ruqayyah pointed out:

“You should lead by example, you know. If whatever you’re trying to preach to me is so effective, then live it out in your life. I’ll see the benefits of it and I’ll want to naturally change.”

Aisha echoed a similar sentiment:

“In Islam, we don’t convert anybody. They talk about giving da‘wah. It’s really, the best thing to do if you want to show someone your religion, just be good to them. Operate with good Islamic etiquette, operate with good values. And that’s really what my friends did… I was definitely attracted to Islam, just from seeing, what is this foundation that makes people so good and so lovely to one another?”
Seif elaborated on his understanding of, and engagement with, *da'wah*, as follows:

“I don’t engage in that kind of aggressive sharing like you’ll see at Dundas Square [public square at major commercial intersection in downtown Toronto]… They’ll have free copies of the Quran, probably bad copies out of Saudi Arabia or something… they just want numbers… they don’t even care what these people do with their lives afterwards.”

Hermione told me that her discomfort about proselytizing stems from “*da'wah stores*” and other forms of public interfacing that focus on the number of people that preachers convert:

“When it was Islam Awareness Week at my university, as an undergrad, after I became Muslim, I was like, ‘Take me away from here!’ It was terrible. A lot of my friends, they make jokes about, like, ‘I converted three people today.’ It’s like, why? It’s not some kind of game… I don’t understand how people find that to be meaningful in any way… I think it does more harm than good… If someone is a terrible person, why would you introduce them to like, a half-baked version of Islam, so they can go and do terrible things in the name of Islam, and ruin it for all the other people?... It’s not very responsible.”

Participants’ skepticism about evangelical information in published form raises questions about the nature of documents, and the value documents hold for processes of learning and socialization – including conversion. The notion that *da'wah* can be conducted through action as much as it can be through preaching and printed texts is supported by the Islamic principle that, as one discussion group participant described, “sometimes, the best way to invite people to love God is by practicing *Sunnah*” (i.e., the way of the Prophet Muhammad). Action-based *da'wah* also reflects a commonly cited verse that is used to dispel stereotypes about aggressive proselytization (Quran 2:256): “There is no compulsion in religion.” The participants quoted above pointed to demonstrating their religion in the way they live, rather than publicly inviting or coercing non-Muslims to embrace Islam. In other words, they spoke about cases of showing, not telling – practicing *da'wah* through behaviour instead of preaching or distributing Islamic literature. The idea that *da'wah* can happen through action over printed documents problematizes the emphasis that much of the existing information practice literature places on accessing and presenting information through recorded media (e.g. printed books and documents, blogs, websites) in their everyday lives (Neal & McKenzie, 2011; Ochola et al., 2015;

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61 A similar practice has been observed in other traditions, such as the charismatic Swedish ministry, Word of Life (*Livets Ord*), whose founder and pastor Ulf Ekman suggested in a newsletter for readers to, “‘Let life be your witness.’ Joy, honesty and willingness to work in your life will testify for you” (Coleman, 2003, p. 21).
Savolainen, 2008). It also challenges a narrow conceptualization of documents as solely physical or material objects, and affirms the idea that documents are socially constructed evidence or proof that carry human emotions, meanings, memories, senses, and experiences (Buckland, 1997; Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016). Furthermore, Hermione’s comments point to the darker side of *da‘wah* that is practiced in an uncritical way; if Muslims introduce non-Muslims to a shallow version of Islam with an aim to convert as many people as possible without supporting them through the process or providing a sense of the nuanced nature of the religion, there is a risk that those converts will use Islam to frame ulterior motives for carrying out violence.

3 Representing, self-fashioning, and information sharing

In a contemporary context that has been marked by terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam (e.g., 9/11, Charlie Hebdo, San Bernardino, Orlando), Muslims face increasing pressure to respond to such violent actions. As Canadian writer and neuroscientist Mohamed Ghilan stated in response to the November 2015 Paris attacks, “asking me to condemn the obviously condemnable presumes my basic moral code is in question.” This problematic assumption is often even more pronounced among Muslims who are new to the faith. Not only do Muslim converts grapple with justifying their beliefs to non-Muslims in a tense political atmosphere, they also negotiate how to present themselves, relate and respond to other Muslims. A key part of this negotiation has to do with what American literary critic and language scholar Stephen Greenblatt has called “self-fashioning” (Greenblatt, 2005). The concept of “self-fashioning” suggests that people actively create and present their selves in order to navigate the world around them and make a name for themselves. This concept is connected to theories of “self-presentation” (Goffman, 1959) – defined as the performances and acts of impression management that people enact, based on perceived demands of situational social interactions (Wong, 2011, p. 32). Self-fashioning is reflected in participants’ anecdotes about modifying their behaviour, clothing, makeup, and vocabulary over the course of their conversion experiences.  

According to the Environics survey of Muslims in Canada, 48% of female respondents report wearing hijab, and six per cent report wearing chador or niqab (Environics, 2016, p. 18). The survey also found that the most significant increase in wearing hijab since 2006 has been reported among young Muslims and Muslims with post-secondary education (Environics, 2016, p. 18).
recalled the following “concessions” she made around the time that she started her bachelor’s degree in a new city:

“I kind of toned down my image. Like I used to have a lot of piercings and stuff, and I took ‘em out. And then I started wearing hijab. Like I wore hijab – I don’t wear it now – but I wore it for about five years… And I eventually got more accepted into the fabric of the Muslim community.”

Dahlia also discussed her negotiations about wearing hijab:

“There were times when I took it [headscarf] off, there were times when I wore it a little bit more traditional… Those are very challenging things, especially in this society, and as we have the media watching us all the time, it’s hard to figure that out.”

Whereas January talked about pressures from the Muslim community to fit in by dressing more conservatively, Dahlia’s comments highlight external pressure from mainstream Canadian media to refrain from wearing controversial religious clothing in public spaces. This issue of being a visible target for Islamophobic attitudes was addressed by Ruqayyah, as follows:

“I was already in the veil [niqab]. I’ve had things thrown at me… Verbal assault… Like, ‘Go back to your country,’ ‘Do you speak English,’ you know, dirty looks or other heated things. Sometimes on the bus, when we were really constricted, there were people behind us yelling.”

Ruqayyah’s recollection of her time wearing niqab reveals the painful consequences of choosing to dress in a visibly Muslim way. Unlike published materials that can be concealed in an e-reader (or tossed at the back of a shelf or into a bag, in the case of printed books and magazines), information about a person’s Muslim identity when carried on the body as religious symbols such as the hijab or niqab is nearly impossible to hide. Muslim women’s clothing items such as the hijab are especially visible following heated debates about public veiling in Quebec and across Canada leading up to the 2015 federal election (CBC News, 2015), and “burkini bans” in France during the summer of 2016 (Associated Press, 2016). These concerns were especially relevant to the women I spoke with. Whether through materials, actions, or terminology, Muslim converts’ decisions to present information about their religious identities are met with affirmation and critique from other Muslims and non-Muslims. Decisions about whether or not to wear hijab, styles of head coverings and other clothing, and gendered aesthetic concerns about appropriate cosmetics are made after careful reflection, consciously anticipating how Muslim peers and non-Muslims may respond to these personal choices. At the same time, wearing
religiously symbolic clothing is a practice developed over time, and may not be done with a particular goal or response in mind. From an Information Studies perspective, religious clothing such as *hijab* is a form of “corporeal information” – “information that is experienced through the senses as the body interacts with the world” (Gorichanaz, 2015). It is through these embodied information experiences (such as wearing a particular clothing item, participating in a specific form of adornment, or moving in a certain way) that a person’s “sensory perceptions” (Gorichanaz, 2015) become informative (ibid.; Lloyd, 2010).

One concern related to peer critique and self-fashioning is the idea of being Muslim “enough.” As anthropologists Jan Blommaert and Piia Varis explain, “enoughness” is a “critical tool for identity work” which involves displaying and enacting “‘enough’ of the emblematic features in order to be ratified as an authentic member of an identity category” (Blommaert & Varis, 2015, p. 156). This tool is represented by “hijabistas” who present themselves as authority figures by expressing their adherence to religious prescriptions about clothing in YouTube videos and other online forums (Blommaert & Varis, 2015).63 Being Muslim “enough” can be a confusing part of the conversion process, as January pointed out when she reflected on her desire to be accepted simply as a Muslim, rather than as a Muslim convert:

> “Sometimes, you become like, the *convert*… It gets tough, because it’s something I don’t really like to be pigeon-holed into… My friend… said to me yesterday, ‘You shouldn’t call yourself a convert anymore, you’ve been Muslim as long as we have been… You’ve been practicing as long as we have been.’ … And I *wish* that I could be received that way.”

January’s comments illustrate how one’s self-perception of being “enough” of a Muslim may be at odds with the perceptions of other believers. This distinction can contribute to a self-consciousness about always being characterized as a new Muslim – even after decades of religious practice – and to a perceived need to constantly learn more. Additionally, being perceived as a convert or new Muslim regardless of when one made a declaration of faith may complicate “stopping behaviour” (Lambert, 2010, see Chapter Two) and a sense of knowing enough. “Enoughness” was also represented during a break at one of the convert discussion group meetings, when one woman pointed out another woman’s nail polish, saying, “I thought

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63 Defined as “Muslim women who dress ‘fashionably’ and/or design fashionable clothes, while orienting towards what is being prescribed by their religion in terms of dress” (Blommaert & Varis, 2015, p. 161) and who are prominent in online settings including “hijabista blogs, online stores, YouTube videos, and Facebook pages” (ibid.).
we weren’t supposed to wear that.” The woman wearing nail polish responded with a polite smile, saying that the shaykh spoke about this issue at the last meeting, and that it was fine so long as fingernails remained clean since water and air could get through. She added, half-jokingly, “I have other things I need to worry about first.” This conversation reflects one convert’s priorities (namely, aspects of religious devotion that supersede choices about cosmetics), the gendered nature of aesthetic guidelines in Islam, and an instance of a Muslim woman correcting another’s appearance to maintain her own piety in addition to the piety of the woman she is correcting (Mulderig, 2011). For the woman who received criticism, her claim that other things take precedence over whether or not to wear nail polish indicates a perceived need to meet basic standards or norms before being troubled about more mundane aspects of keeping a religiously appropriate appearance.

The notion of needing to meet basic standards or expectations calls to mind Nobel laureate Herbert Simon’s concept of “satisficing” (McCain, 2015). “Satisficing” has been explored in research on academic library patrons’ choices about when to stop searching for information, decision-making among public library administrators, and digital library use (Parker & Berryman, 2007; Prabha et al., 2007; Jatkevicius, 2003; Buczynski, 2005). Other information scholars have argued that self-presentation of the body is itself an information practice, cultivated in response to one’s peers, professional setting, and personal goals and expectations (Cox, 2012; Lloyd, 2010; Lloyd, 2009; Lloyd, 2007; Veinot, 2007). Although these studies are not focused on religious experiences, they shed light on the common practice of looking for the necessary information to meet basic, immediate needs (rather than trying to develop comprehensive knowledge about an issue). For Muslim converts who may feel overwhelmed by the wealth of information available to them about their religion, satisficing can be a helpful strategy for managing their identity according to specific situations, one step at a time.

For Muslim converts who self-identify as women, the hijab is a frequent topic of conversation. For example, Aisha recalled a recent trip when she wore hijab, as follows:

“I didn’t know where I was. And I hear over my shoulder, ‘Where are you going?’… I turn around, there’s a brother there, with a beard. And he says, ‘Where are you going, sister?’ And I told him, and he was very gentle, and gave me very clear instructions on what to do… That would not have happened if I wasn’t in hijab.”
Aisha’s quotation indicates that the *hijab* can be a material resource that helps Muslim converts to publicly self-identify as Muslim, and connect with others who share their religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, it is not without controversy. Ideas about patriarchal attitudes and systems that impose head coverings on women and limit their personal agency and freedoms are especially prevalent in more progressive Muslim communities. Jennifer elaborated on the issue of religiously prescribed head coverings as follows:

“There’s a million possibilities in terms of different interpretation… I remember when we had this discussion with a very good friend of mine, where she said, ‘All Muslims are so divided, we should all be together, and it doesn’t matter if some people believe you wear the niqab, some people believe you don’t, what does it matter?’ And I said, ‘Exactly. And *some* people believe you don’t need to wear it at all.’ And she’s like, ‘Well, somewhere a line has to be drawn! So that is not acceptable!’”

In recounting this conversation with her Muslim friend, Jennifer identifies a double standard of interpreting religious teachings about acceptable head coverings for women. Although Jennifer personally wears *hijab*, she acknowledges that this is only one interpretation among many, and respects the choice made by many Muslim women to refrain from covering their hair at all. Similarly, Dahlia referenced the “de-hijabing” movement, noting that:

“Most of my Muslim friends are women… a lot of them are taking off the hijab, some of them are always negotiating what it means to be a Muslim woman.”

These comments reveal that deciding what information to materially present to the public (including to other Muslims) through clothing items such as the *hijab* is a central consideration in defining Muslim identity. In addition to internal debates, there are also debates outside of Muslim communities in parts of Canada and Europe (e.g., among human rights activists and feminist groups) about proposed and approved legislation to ban the *hijab, niqab, burqa* and other religious head coverings, which is interpreted by many as another form of patriarchy with predominantly male politicians deciding what women should do with their bodies (Amiraux, 2016; Institut Simone de Beauvoir, 2013; Lefebvre & Beaman, 2012). Despite these debates, a recent survey by the Environics Institute reported that 53% of Muslim women in Canada indicated that they wear *hijab, chador*, or *niqab* in public – which increased from 42% in 2006.

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64 Progressive Islam or “Islamic liberalism” is defined by Muslims for Progressive Values as an orientation towards inter- and intra-faith dialogue and tolerance, community involvement, critical engagement with sacred texts, human rights (including an emphasis on women’s and LGTBQ+ inclusion), and freedom of expression (Muslims for Progressive Values).
(Environics, 2016, p. 18). This survey also noted that the practice of wearing a head covering has most notably increased among women between the ages of 18 and 34, “where it is now most prevalent (comprising 60% of this group)” (Environics, 2016, p. 18). Furthermore, “this practice has seen the most growth in the past decade among those with a college or university education” (Environics, 2016, p. 18).

Due to gendered aesthetic guidelines, decisions about what information to present through one’s physical appearance can be a more obvious concern for Muslim converts who self-identify as women than for those who self-identify as men. In particular, female Muslim converts use clothing as a resource to understand their religious selves and present their beliefs to others. As Aisha describes in the following quotation, clothing items such as the hijab act as visible markers of religious affiliation:

“I’m not even in hijab full-time. So people don’t know. If I were just to walk up to someone without any identifiers and my name and ask, ‘Hey, is there a space for prayer?’, they’d be like, ‘Hmm.’”

Items such as hijab are visible material indicators of adherence to Islam not because of an individual’s choice to wear them, but because of widely accepted norms about how Muslim women (and men) should dress. These norms are reinforced at events such as convention bazaars, where jewellery, scarves, and abayas are on display, primarily catering to women shoppers and sold by vendors wearing various styles of Islamic clothing. Normative ways to materially express Muslim identity are also circulated by online authorities such as the hijabista bloggers referenced earlier, who share information about how to dress in accordance with Islamic principles about appropriate conduct while staying current with the latest fashion trends. In an effort to be faithful and present oneself as authentic, Muslim converts may internalize such norms at a rapid pace. For example, Ruqayyah recalled how quickly she adopted normative styles of clothing: “By the end of the first year [after taking the shahadah], I was fully in abaya, fully in niqab, I was wearing the veil.”

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65 Similar experience to Amanda, a white, middle-class, 30-something woman living in the U.S. who converted to Islam, in Galman, 2013: Wearing hijab “enables her to be visibly identified as Muslim… ‘if I greet them with Salaam Aleikum they look and try to sum me up as to whether I am Muslim or not. [The hijab] lets them know that I am.’” (p. 429).
Still, decisions about how to dress change over time. Dahlia explained:

“For a long time, I wore the abaya. And I wore the hijab but in a more, I guess traditional way. The prescribed way. And I mean there were bumps along the way where I took off the hijab for a bit, but for the most part I was more conservative for a long period of time. And now I’m less conservative in my appearance… But I don’t necessarily believe this is what traditional Islam represents. It’s just how I’ve kind of changed over time.”

As Dahlia’s reflections reveal, conversion is a continuous, evolving process that involves conscious decisions about clothing styles to express both personal beliefs and attitudes, and shifting aesthetic preferences. Choices about whether or not to conform to prescriptive ideals are informed by “corporeal” experiences (Lloyd, 2010; Gorichanaz, 2015) and considerations about how one wants to be perceived by their peers, community, and family. Moreover, these decisions are guided by the tension between internal faith and outward performance. Several participants noted a difference between what a person believes as an individual, and what one presents in public. For instance, Kelly admitted that she sometimes feels self-conscious that others might perceive her to be performing her faith if she is praying for longer than others in the room. From Kelly’s perspective, internal faith is a person’s genuine spirituality – known only to them and to God – whereas performance can be a superficial projection to gain acceptance or show off one’s piety. Similarly, there is an element of performance in clothing choices, since these decisions may be perceived by others variously as a personal decision, a way to adhere to religious prescriptions, or a combination thereof. Regardless of the motivation for dressing a certain way, choosing clothing and other aesthetic styles is an act of information sharing. In particular, because of their visibility in a predominantly non-Muslim context, items such as head and face coverings and long dresses and thobes stand in as resources upon which viewers base judgments about the wearer’s religious affiliation and even their degree of devotion.

The company one keeps (not only a person’s physical appearance or the vocabulary they use) also informs others of their religious identity. January alluded to this when she described attending events accompanied by Muslim friends: “I’d be lying if I didn’t say, sometimes when I go to Muslim events – like MSA dinners or mosques or stuff like that – I like to go with a Muslim friend, one that’s born Muslim, from a Muslim background, so I have that sense of

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66 Refer to Jennifer’s explanation of the distinction between faith and ideas imposed by religious institutions, in Chapter Seven.
legitimacy.” Whether consciously or not, through actions such as clothing choices and designating friends with whom to go to social gatherings, Muslim converts cultivate public personae that are presented at work and school, on public transit, at mosques and religious education classes, and to their family and friends. These self-fashioning activities make up an information sharing practice that is developed over time, as part of what sociologist Baljit Nagra refers to as “reactive identity formation” (2011, p. 429). Nagra defines reactive identity formation as the “complex social process” in which Muslims in Canada “assert their identities” by coping with discrimination, resisting mainstream negative portrayals of Islam, and self-learning about their faith in the post-9/11 era (Nagra, 2011, p. 429). Sharing information about religious identity through texts (e.g. published works, written comments, artwork), speech (e.g. verbal responses to media coverage about Islam, public da’wah), and the body (e.g. wearing hijab or niqab) is a critical element of this process.

Each site of exchange has different implications. For example, in the workplace, colleagues tend to have certain perceptions based on what they know about the people with whom they work every day. These perceptions can change or shift once they learn that one of their colleagues has embraced Islam – depending on their understanding of and assumptions about the religion – and they may respond according to these new perceptions. In turn, converts react to these new responses, and they sometimes feel obligated to educate about their religion. On public transit and streets, where religious identities are displayed to “unknown others” through visible clothing items and styles, even when converts do not actually interact with strangers one-on-one, they potentially experience aggressive or sympathetic looks, comments, questions, and even physical abuse (e.g. pushing, thrown objects) nonetheless. Their public identification applies not only to non-Muslims, but also to peer believers, who find solidarity with these experiences or strike up conversations. Finally, at mosques and religious conventions, courses and social gatherings, where converts routinely interact with peer believers, they may feel pressure to meet a new set of expectations and prove their competence and knowledge about appropriate conduct, speech, and physical appearance. Thus, the nature of information expressed and exchanged is partly tied to the site in which this information is shared – and the standards, expectations, norms, rules, and routines by which these sites are bound.
4 Being visible and invisible

Related to information sharing through the body, Muslim converts navigate the paradox of being ignored and feeling uncomfortably visible. For example, Hermione admitted feeling invisible because of her appearance as someone from the Middle East, her education in Islamic law, and her affiliation with several “born Muslims,” including her grandmother. Hermione noted that because she “looks” Muslim, she rarely receives the same treatment from Muslim community members as her white convert counterparts. As she remarked during our first interview:

“My friend had converted around the same time as me… She’s from a Jewish-Scottish background, so she’s like, white-passing, or white. So when we would go to things together, people would go up to her and be like, ‘You’re a convert. We want to teach you everything.’ And she would get very annoyed ‘cause I would be standing next to her, and she’d be like, ‘She is a convert, as well. But you’re not teaching her anything.’… I always have to be like, ‘By the way, before I have this conversation with you, I’m a convert, so keep that in mind.’”

Hermione’s experiences resonate with comments made by other participants about their experiences of being invisible. Aisha shared her experience of invisibility (albeit for another reason) as follows:

“Especially when you have a name that does not show people that you might be Muslim… There’s something good about being visible. There are challenges that come with it, but there’s something good about it, too.”

The above quotations point to two experiences: being invisible as a Muslim who does not appear in typically Islamic clothing and is not perceived as a member of a predominantly Muslim cultural group, and being invisible for not conforming to widespread expectations about what a Muslim convert in a major North American city should look and sound like (read: white, English-speaking, unaccented). Aisha’s and Hermione’s comments reveal how the ways in which peer Muslims and the broader public respond to converts depends on the information that converts display through their bodies, and the perceptions and knowledge on which others base their judgments about Muslims with whom they interact or see in passing.

In addition to embodied information, names play an important role in indicating a person’s national or cultural heritage. Indeed, the question of whether to change one’s name upon conversion was raised by participants such as Ruqayyah, as follows:
“I never changed my name… because it was part of who I was. Some people think that you have to change your name in order to be accepted in the community. And it is real amongst converts… There are no Muslim names, just Arabic names… People are always asking, ‘What’s your Muslim name?’… But as time goes on, you’re like, no no no, it’s not about outside, superficial things.”

Ruqayyah’s comments suggest that names are a key resource for sharing information about oneself, critically tied to questions such as “who am I?” and “how do I relate to the world around me?” Interestingly, while “Aisha” and “Ruqayyah” did not change their names, they chose Arabic pseudonyms to represent themselves in this research project. As information researchers and economists have pointed out, names are tied to where a person comes from, and how they fit (or do not fit) into a system. Naming conventions such as subject headings and other descriptors are not innocent labels, but have been created within specific social and cultural contexts, whether they are intended to classify objects or human populations (Cavanagh, 2009; Olson, 2007). Names also have direct consequences on how a person is perceived. This concern is especially relevant for migrants and newcomers to Canada, who often consider changing (and do change) their names in order to fit into a new system, simplify pronunciations for their coworkers and neighbours, and prevent job discrimination (Dechief, 2014; Dechief, 2009; Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012). For Muslim converts who find themselves treated as invisible because of their names, name modification is one avenue to connect with peer Muslims and receive recognition for their beliefs in the larger community.

In addition to names and physical appearance, Muslim converts’ clothing choices have consequences for their in/visibility among Muslim peers. In our second interview, Aisha recalled running into the shaykh who taught the course she attended in western Canada:

“I actually was staying at the same hotel as him. And I bumped into him at the breakfast buffet… I was like, ‘Salamu alaykum,’ [and he responded,] ‘Wa alaykumu s-salam.’ I wasn’t wearing hijab at the time so he didn’t know I was in his course, he didn’t remember me.”

Unlike Hermione who was often “invisible” because of assumptions that she is knowledgeable about all aspects of Islam based on her physical appearance as a woman with Middle Eastern heritage, area of study, and social network, Aisha felt overlooked due to her physical appearance as a white woman, non-Muslim name and only occasionally wearing the hijab. As Aisha pointed out, “the Arab cultures, the Pakistani or the Indian cultures… they’re a minority in Canada but
they’re a majority in the mosque, and I’m the minority in the mosque.” These excerpts illustrate how spiritual information is often invisible, which can pose challenges to sharing information, identifying prayer spaces, and pursuing religious learning with Muslim peers. In his analysis of the relationships between information sources and processes and spirituality, Jarkko Kari elaborates on the invisible, ineffable nature of spiritual information (Kari, 2007). Specifically, Kari argues that:

“Information can be about the spiritual (e.g. mysticism) … information can be supposedly acquired by spiritual means (e.g. trance channelling); information can originate from a source considered as a spiritual entity (e.g. God)… [and] an information process can be simultaneously experienced as a spiritual process (e.g. library work as ministry)” (Kari, 2007, p. 957).

These characteristics are not necessarily visible to the human eye; rather, they illustrate how spiritual information sources and processes are experiential, and thus difficult to show and describe to others who have not undergone similar experiences. In a lecture by Myriam Francois-Cerrah, the British Muslim writer speaks about how problematic this phenomenon is, remarking that black and Asian converts to Islam often receive different treatment and attention than their white brothers and sisters (Francois-Cerrah, 2012). As Francois-Cerrah describes, white converts to Islam are generally perceived to be an achievement and as blank slates that need to be educated about the religion, whereas black and Asian converts are taken for granted as people who “of course, would have converted eventually” (Francois-Cerrah, 2012).

At the other end of the spectrum, Muslim converts’ clothing styles and racial identities make their religious affiliation visible in the public sphere, and provoke other kinds of assumptions. For example, Aisha described her initial reservations about wearing hijab at her workplace as follows:

“Work is the final frontier. I wear it [hijab] to Islamic events, I wear it to the mosque, sometimes I wear it home from the mosque, and work was where I thought, am I going to be undermined? I’m not going to be viewed in the same way. So that was really scary for me.”

67 Earlier in the same interview, Aisha contrasted her experience as a “minority in the mosque” with wearing hijab on a recent visit to the U.S., as follows: “It’s just so beautiful, because people are greeting me ‘Salamu alaykum’ in the streets. It’s almost more beautiful to be wearing hijab when you’re a minority, because everyone’s greeting each other. And it’s kind of like you’re looking out for each other in a way.”
Contexts such as the workplace influence Muslim converts’ decisions about what information to share about their religious identities – whether that information is in the form of topics of conversation or visible material indicators. Although wearing *hijab* and other visible religious symbols at work is one way of establishing difference with coworkers who do not visibly display their religious (or non-religious) identities, in Aisha’s case, she acknowledged that the risks of wearing *hijab* at work – a workplace situated in a pluralistic city – were lower than they might be in another environment. As she explained:

“I work in a university, so being in hijab, it was very hard for me, but probably the *easiest* situation I could have been in. ‘Cause they’re not going to fire me, I’m in a union, like, what are they going to do? One person said, ‘How are people reacting?’ And I looked at her and I said, ‘Well, what can they say?’”

Although Aisha eventually decided to wear *hijab* (and noted that doing so has given her “self-satisfaction” and feeling “at peace with it”), there are certain outward signs of piety from which she refrains:

“I also don’t believe that I need to scar my body, show how devoted I am to Islam. Some people believe you should scar your forehead, you should scar your knees if you’re a woman, because it shows that you’re more pious in some way. I don’t believe that has to be the truth.”

These difficult decisions about public material expression are not unique to the Toronto area. As Alexandra pointed out when she reflected on meeting with a young convert during a visit to her native country in eastern Europe:

“She’s this short, white girl, wearing this Turkish-style abaya and the headscarf. And she’s just worried, how am I going to get home? Like, can I walk down the street wearing this?... Can I wear this to school? What are they going to say? What if it’s not even allowed?... These were dilemmas that I never had to deal with.”

In contrast with Aisha’s comments about the fears she initially had with regard to wearing *hijab* at work, Hermione described how the *hijab* could act as a resource to help contest negative perceptions about Islam and Muslims when worn in public:

“I recently went to a few voluntary stuff (sic) where I live. And I was planting trees, and I was thinking like, I wish, I wish I was doing this in hijab, so I could be like, ‘I’m a Muslim and I’m planting trees.’ I think it’s kind of sad that, at a time where people often automatically just have a bad perception of Muslims – not that I’m like a great Muslim or anything – but that they just can’t see like, another person as a Muslim. Like someone they interact with.”
Hermione’s comments suggest that rather than hesitating about wearing hijab in public, she aspires to wear hijab to be a visible reminder of Muslims’ positive contributions to the local community and the environment. Comparable actions of linking visible symbols of Muslim identity with values such as environmentalism, community service, and democracy have been noted elsewhere. For example, in a study of transnational identity construction among Muslim youth, the author described a Muslim woman who wore a stars-and-stripes hijab at a lecture on “Islam – the source of universal peace” hosted by a Muslim Students’ Association at an American university one month after 9/11 (Schmidt, 2004, p. 31). In the author’s words:

“Perhaps it could be argued that her statement of identification was a defensive act, fighting the processes of exclusion that increased in the wake of the terrorist attacks. But it could also be argued that her choice was the result of a conscious evaluation of identity, a token of an Islamic identity integrated and woven into the fabric of American life and public space” (Schmidt, 2004, pp. 31-32).

Like the woman cultural studies scholar Garbi Schmidt describes, rather than separating Islam from western liberal democratic values, Hermione’s aspiration to wear hijab in public illustrates how materials such as religious head coverings can work towards reconciliation and challenging stereotypes about Muslims in the GTA. Not only would wearing hijab help to make positive contributions of Muslims visible in the public sphere, but this embodied practice of head covering is a way of presenting oneself as Muslim to peer believers as part of the process of embracing Islam and “becoming” Muslim (Galman, 2013; Lave, 1982; Butler, 2005; Lloyd, 2007).

5 Religiously-sanctioned behaviour

Whether they have to do with print and online publications, speech, or aesthetics, Muslim converts’ information sharing practices are shaped by religious norms. As Abdullah explained, a believer’s behaviour is expected to signify their adherence to Islamic codes of acceptable actions:

“People will look at your outside behaviour, and they’ll say okay, that accords with what we expect from a person in this position. Or it doesn’t. And if it doesn’t, there’s kind of a loss of respect in some ways.”
These expectations are particularly relevant to Muslims who are perceived to be in positions of authority, such as scholars and imams. Yet religious norms extend to all community members – converts, born Muslims, and those in leadership. Abdullah went on to say that:

“The community has a role to play in maintaining an identity firstly and making sure that people don’t deviate from the religion. Like maintaining orthodoxy, I guess is what would be, in thought and practice. And so, the way that occurs is it’s encouraged, religiously, for people to correct one another, in a good manner.”

One of the ways in which mutual correction happens is through online interactions. Nadia Khan, a doctoral student in Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, cites anthropologist Charles Hirschkind’s analysis of online khutbah videos (Hirschkind, 2012) in which he “observes that Muslims who leave comments on YouTube videos police each other to ensure that their comments on videos uphold a level of decorum similar to that found in a mosque, hence creating collective moral spaces online” (Khan, 2014, p. 381). Parallels of this kind of “pious interaction and argument” (Hirschkind, 2012) are also evident in off-line environments, such as the “haram police” described by the two U.S.-based hijabi bloggers who presented at one of the conventions I attended.68 They talked about encountering other young Muslim women who were quick to judge when they had to rush to class and did not have time to read their Sunnah during prayer, and stressed the importance of giving advice kindly instead of criticizing other Muslim women. The idea that criticizing or correcting the behaviours and aesthetic choices of others can be a way to demonstrate piety has been explored outside of North America, such as among women revivalists in Cairo mosques (Mahmood, 2004). Although it is clear that performances of religious devotion and knowledge happen offline, they may be more pronounced in the digital media environment. This environment allows for a high volume of Muslims from around the world to interact with each other. Yet some digital platforms afford anonymous and fleeting interactions, which can lead to fragmented identities, increased self-consciousness, and discrepancies between beliefs expressed by online authorities and those articulated offline (Campbell, 2012, p. 73). Moreover, social media can establish a false sense of interpersonal intimacy at the same time as disconnection and a lack of accountability for the content one shares (Schwarz, 2011).

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68 Hijabi bloggers or “hijabistas” such as the convention presenters run in parallel to the “mipsters” movement, which uses social media to advance an alternative portrayal of Muslim women in North America (O’Neil, 2014).
Regardless of where critique and advising happen, responding to other Muslims’ judgments is an exercise in identity formation. Whether advising corrections occurs on- or off-line, there are acceptable manners about offering such critique. Alexandra noted that:

“There’s a lot of speeches going on in the community about the etiquette of advising other people. Major crisis in our community… Someone can come up to say, ‘You’re wrong, you’ve been getting this wrong your whole life. Fix yourself.’ And like, who are you? You’re just a layperson, just like me. Just because you’re a little older or you have a beard, you can’t just come and start talking down to me.”

This interview excerpt reveals Alexandra’s ideas about gendered and generational authority – namely, her skepticism about uncritically accepting advice from other Muslims simply on the basis of their gender, age or adherence to traditional ways of dressing. It also identifies advisory etiquette as a significant issue facing Muslims – converts or not.

Codes of acceptable behaviour, including character traits such as hospitality, charity, honesty, kindness, and generosity, are supported by religious texts and teachings, and reinforced at religious education classes. For example, at the convert discussion group, the shaykh often prefaced concepts such as human nature and evolution with the phrase, “in the Islamic perspective” and qualified statements with “the correct opinion – according to the Prophet.” At one meeting, he noted that the steps of performing wudhu are based on what Allah has legislated in the Quran and hadith, rather than what may seem intuitively logical. Norms about the correct way to practice were further reinforced at prayer breaks, when men and women occupied separate worship spaces (divided by walls and a flight of stairs). Gender segregated spaces are also a common feature of religious conventions and large gatherings. As Alexandra explained:

“You have a large hall, you have a sit-down food and entertainment event, you’re going to have a women’s side, you’re going to have a guys’ side, and the middle is the mixed side. And you know, this is without any kind of barriers around it or anything. It’s just all in the same room… At large conferences and stuff, they call it the ‘family’ section… And Muslims like to joke that it’s for families, and people trying to make families [laughs]… A lot of Muslims will enter into that section, because they don’t segregate, they just want to sit down.”

Although Alexandra pointed to the humour of a term used to designate mixed gender spaces at events, gender-specific space also has a tendency to exclude women, which has implications for

69 Literally translated as “ablution.” Ritual washing before daily prayers, which involves specific steps including mental preparation by beginning with a spiritual intention.
women converts’ access to a wider social network, and thus, to religious knowledge, and spiritual care and support (Prickett, 2015; Bano & Kalmbach, 2012). Hermione described an instance of the exclusion she experienced as follows:

“I remember when I was in [eastern Canadian province], for example, there was an MSA there, and there the gender and language barrier was really apparent. Because when I contacted them, they had some events, and I was like, ‘Oh, can I come to that?’ They’re like, ‘No, it’s just for brothers.’”

In addition to calling out the obvious exclusion she faced when she approached her local MSA about attending an event, Hermione’s comments highlight regional variation – namely, another part of Canada where the Muslim population is smaller and where available programs and services for converts are therefore limited. This stands in contrast with participants’ experiences in the GTA, a region which is home to the largest Muslim population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011b) and where there are more options for mosques and religious programming. Despite this greater variety, Hermione added that even in the GTA, “a lot of the scholars are male especially, it’s not always easy to access them in terms of being appropriate… And also, often at talks, all the guys sort of like rush forward and you’re standing there like, can you please, just, move away.”

It is important to note that gender-specific worship and event spaces are not always perceived in a negative light. For example, after inviting me to accompany her to a religious education course she was attending following our interview, Kelly added:

“I might have to talk to a female organizer to get them to talk to someone else… because they have some boundaries. They’re healthy boundaries, but I just want to respect those boundaries. Just for you to be cognizant of when you go in there, just don’t go downstairs where the guys are, even though they probably do that when they’re in other classes.”

While Kelly recognized her respect for decisions to segregate spaces as a way of establishing “healthy boundaries”, Hermione’s comments suggest that the gendered organization of Muslim events has a direct impact on access to information and expertise, including opportunities to meet mentors and peers who can provide support along the way. In contrast, Rachel spoke about the lack of barriers she experienced on account of her gender. As she explained:

“I know there’s some masjids that I’ve seen, whose websites I’ve checked out, in order to talk to the imam if you’re a woman you’re supposed to have a guardian with you. Which I don’t find very appealing or accessible, or correct. But that’s my own opinion. But at
this masjid, they’re very much not like that. Women can talk to men, especially the imam. And it’s not looked down upon in any way, or even gossiped about or frowned at or anything like that.”

With regard to gender-segregated spaces in mosques, Dahlia shared her opinion, as follows:

“I don’t mind it. And I actually think it helps me focus on me and my spiritual connection to God… And I see the reason for it. What I don’t like is obviously the way women’s sections are smaller and weirder and dirtier sometimes. That’s what bothers me. The lack of attention paid to it. But the divider itself doesn’t bother me that much.”

As Dahlia’s comments reveal, the issue of separated spaces for men and women is less about division itself than it is about relegating women to spaces that are cared for less than spaces designated for men’s worship. By virtue of their spatial marginalization, these separate sections reflect widespread attitudes about how women’s presence is valued in mosques and expectations about women’s involvement in worship.

Chapter Summary
This chapter described Muslim converts’ experiences of sharing and avoiding information, creatively expressing their beliefs and opinions, and negotiating religious identity through conversations with others and self-presentation in the public sphere. It also explored the tension between being visible as a Muslim (e.g. marked by widely recognized religious symbols and clothing such as hijab) and being invisible as a convert (e.g. by physical appearances that alternately fit and do not fit within stereotypes about Muslims). Additionally, this chapter examined how Islamic moral codes and customs affect the information Muslim converts share – whether through their vocabulary, the ways they dress, or other ways of performing religious devotion. Finally, this chapter reflected on converts’ experiences of the relationship between gendered spaces and access to information, expertise, and participation in worship. By illustrating how Muslim converts in the Toronto area express themselves and exchange information, this chapter concludes a series of findings about how understandings about one’s religious self develop through everyday practices of information sharing, evaluation and seeking.
Chapter 9
Conclusion

“Information is more of an experience.” – Liam

Findings overview

This chapter links the preceding findings chapters with theoretical insights about the connections among conversion to Islam (particularly in the GTA), identity formation, and information practice. In their analysis of “situated learning” among communities of practitioners (namely, tailors, butchers, quartermasters, midwives, and recovering alcoholics), Lave and Wenger describe the transformative and transitional process from novice to “successful participant” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Takhteyev, 2012). Wenger expands on this idea in his later work, in which he defines learning as a means of actively constructing relational identities (Wenger, 1998). The notion that learning is an inherently social exercise has been accepted in information science literature that examines “information in social practice” (Cox, 2012). As Andrew Cox argues, information activities – including information seeking, creation and use – are “woven through most practices, but rarely the primary centre of social actors’ attention” (Cox, 2012, p. 177). In other words, “finding information is not the main purpose; it is a means to an end” (Cox, 2012, p. 185).

For the Muslim converts who participated in this project, finding information is, indeed, a means to pursue their awareness of their embraced religion and to continually build their understanding of who they are. The ways in which converts negotiate their personal relationships to Islam are informed by a variety of factors, including – though not limited to – the political climate (at a global level, and at local levels of the GTA and Muslim congregations), geographic access to worship and educational sites, class (which affords the ability to access extracurricular spiritual

\[70\] One example cited is Hartel on gourmet cooking (Cox, 2012, p. 185; Hartel, 2007). Paul Jaeger and Gary Burnett also discuss how information is “interwoven into social interaction” (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010) in various social settings. This insight is applicable to an array of contexts, as varied as massive multiplayer online gaming, exchanging political information through Twitter, homeless youth, and activist groups’ use of social media for mobilization (Swendsen, 2013).
pursuits such as courses and retreats\textsuperscript{71}, social networks and public perceptions, and print and digital media (i.e. “information” as documents).

Before exploring the theoretical connections and contributions of this study, it is necessary to revisit the research questions introduced at the beginning of this thesis:

1. What strategies and actions do Muslim converts employ to seek, evaluate, and share information related to their conversion experiences?
2. How do these information practices help converts to develop and present Muslim identities?

These questions were motivated by my interest in information behaviour and practice with deep, personal meaning and profound consequences, and its effects in experiences of transition. They also informed my fieldwork by moving beyond a limited focus on “goal-oriented information seeking” (Cox, 2012, p. 185) and asking participants how they manage and produce information in their daily lives. Findings correspond with the first research question. Chapter Six examined how Muslim converts living in the GTA navigate systems and networks that lead them to informative resources. This chapter described the prominent role that serendipitous discovery plays in religious information practices, and the value that non-purposive, unexpected encounters with influential texts and people hold for Muslims throughout their conversion experiences. Relatedly, these serendipitous moments are often framed within a religious worldview that suggests that humans are born Muslim, and that conversion (or, reversion) is a way of returning to this natural state. Muslim converts not only search for and fortuitously find useful resources, but also filter through the often overwhelming wealth of information about Islam that has proliferated during a time that has simultaneously witnessed post-9/11 politics, widespread ICT diffusion, and increased transnational movement and communication. This chapter also found that Muslim converts experience a learning curve in identifying safe and welcoming worship and educational spaces that are economically and geographically accessible – particularly, at a time when many young Muslims are turning away from bricks-and-mortar mosques to practice their faith. Furthermore, Chapter Six described how Muslim converts are informed by mainstream media, scholarly books and articles, sacred narratives, and works of fiction and popular non-

\textsuperscript{71} Spiritual retreats have particular importance for Muslims, as such activities were exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad and are thus widely understood to be part of the Sunnah (i.e. the way of the Prophet which believers are encouraged to emulate in their daily lives) (refer to Dickson & Sharify-Funk, forthcoming).
fiction that they read, annotate, bookmark, watch, listen to, and interpret. Another way that Muslim converts seek spiritual information and guidance is by looking inward – that is, by reflecting on their intuition and the way that engaging with their embraced religion (e.g. through reciting the Quran, enacting prayer postures, and wearing hijab) makes them feel.

Chapter Seven investigated how Muslim converts evaluate peer recommendations, articulate their trust in religious authorities, and identify theological and political agendas embedded in opinions, advice, and approaches to practicing Islam. It described how digital media serve educational and social purposes in supporting Muslim converts to learn about Islam, connect with scholars and peer believers, and create platforms for self-expression and intrafaith dialogue. This chapter also discussed how Muslim converts vet or sift through book recommendations and other advice from friends, mentors, and experts (on- and off-line) according to their perceptions about the referee/source’s trustworthiness, knowledge, qualifications, and contextual relevance. Additionally, it considered classificatory activities (e.g. categorizing personal libraries and photo albums, bookmarking websites) as a means of informing oneself about intrareligious politics and gender relations, spiritual traditions, and Islam’s relationship to other religions and the public sphere. Finally, Chapter Seven elaborated on the dual influence of secular educational institutions and a perceived crisis of authority in Islam on how Muslim converts learn their religion and articulate authors’ and speakers’ motivations.

Chapter Eight explored information sharing in terms of Muslim converts’ approaches to articulating their beliefs and commitments, and exchanging ideas, opinions, and assumptions. It described the impact of the global political climate on what kind of information is shared, and what is kept hidden or avoided entirely. More specifically, this chapter featured instances of self-censorship as a way of protecting one’s religious identity and relationships with friends and family. On the other hand, it highlighted creative pursuits such as film production, writing and presenting sermons, and visual art as productive ways of articulating what it means to be Muslim, connecting with community members, and challenging stereotypes. This chapter also considered how evangelization can occur through being kind, peaceful, and hospitable rather than publicly distributing pamphlets and participating in street da‘wah. Finally, Chapter Eight reflected on participants’ experiences of self-fashioning (via vocabulary, clothing, names, and adhering to religious codes of conduct), the gendered nature of aesthetic decisions, and
apprehensions about public in/visibility. This chapter aimed to demonstrate how information sharing – whether through documents, speech, or the body – helps Muslim converts to connect with local and global Muslim communities, while it may undermine belonging in other spaces.

This concluding chapter frames findings within explorations of learning and information practice in the context of professional identity formation to discuss how exploring these phenomena in relation to religious conversion can contribute to understanding the role that information plays in transitional situations, and ways in which information seeking and use can be spiritually rewarding. It also draws connections between participants’ experiences of developing and presenting religious identities, and relevant theoretical concerns about information practice. By interpreting the findings presented in the previous three chapters with regard to their broader theoretical implications, this chapter will add to the framework introduced earlier in this thesis, which emphasized spiritual literacy, knowledge construction, and information experience as sensitizing concepts. This chapter will also remark on this study’s implications for scholarship and program developers, policymakers, and library and information professionals. Finally, it will reflect on the study’s limitations and areas to be investigated in future research.

1 Theoretical connections
The following section is organized according to three overarching sensitizing concepts: informing the self through religious practice, constructing spiritual literacy, and social world beyond regional borders. While these concepts are organized as separate units, they are intended to be complementary.

1.1 Informing the self through religious practice

“More than merely a spiritual shift, conversion can also be a complex physical and cultural process that requires intense instruction and mentoring in an observant community”

(Galman, 2013, p. 424).

As anthropologist Sally Campbell Galman notes above, religious conversion goes beyond a change in a person’s spirituality; it involves bodily and social participation among peer believers, learning from teachers and mentors, and personal contemplation. Exploring the many aspects of
Conversion is one way to think about information practice in a holistic way. Conversion includes looking for resources and sharing them, reconciling what logically “makes sense” with how embracing a new set of beliefs makes you feel, and learning through both physical senses and disembodied online media. The co-occurrence of these elements – which may, at first, seem to be contradictory – challenges dominant interpretations of information behaviour, which have continued to be primarily grounded in work and library contexts, and often imply that information seeking and use are motivated by cognitive needs (see Cox, 2012, p. 184; e.g., Dervin, 1983, Ellis, 1989, 1993; Kuhlthau, 1991, 1993). Instead of framing conversion to Islam in the GTA as a purely individual, cognitive process of rationally and purposefully seeking and gathering information, or one that is strictly shaped by external sociocultural and political forces, participants’ experiences are in tune with a movement to build on the idea of information practice with greater attention to spirituality, materiality, affect, and embodied habits (Cox, 2012, p. 179; Fourie & Julien, 2014; Gaston et al., 2015; Gorichanaz, 2015; Gorichanaz, 2016a; Julien et al., 2005; Kari, 2009; Kari & Hartel, 2007; Latham, 2014; Lloyd, 2010; Nahl & Bilal, 2007; Neal & McKenzie, 2011; Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2015).

As participants’ experiences illustrate, information practice is more than socially constructed habits and strategies to find and use written documents (on- or off-line) to achieve certain goals. The narratives included in the preceding findings chapters point to how objects such as clothing carry information on a person’s body – especially for women. Aisha described how wearing *hijab* publicly identified her as a Muslim when she visited the U.S. and helped to start conversations with peer believers, while Ruqayyah recalled how wearing *niqab* made her a target of Islamophobic remarks and abuse. Such objects have a resounding impact on how other people in a given social setting – whether in public spaces, mosques, schools, libraries, the workplace, or leisure activities – respond to the person carrying that information, and how they convey additional information back to them. Thinking of information practice as inclusive of sociocultural, emotional, and embodied aspects aligns with Mansson McGinty’s idea of “display[ing] transformation” (2006, p. 41). Participants’ stories indicate that learning to be Muslim requires not only looking for and assessing sources on their own, but also figuring out how to publicly represent who they are and what they believe. Phrased another way, information practice in the context of conversion to Islam in the GTA involves “the interplay between public
representations and personal appropriations, not only of Islam but also of gender issues and other social and political ideas” (Mansson McGinty, 2006, p. 7). Increased attention to the relationship between material aspects of information practice and the interplay between the personal and the public is relevant beyond this study’s domain, for other kinds of transitions in which people are striving to belong in a new community or define themselves in a new way. Embodied information behaviour and practice is a relatively new “frontier” in information science, with its attention to integrated human-information experiences. This dissertation adds to this emerging body of work.

In his discussion of practice theory, social theorist Andreas Reckwitz argues, “there are no different realms: bodily and mental patterns are necessary components of practices and thus of the social” (2002, p. 252). Relatedly, Wenger points out that “the process of engaging in practice always involves the whole person, both acting and knowing... so-called manual activity is not thoughtless, and mental activity is not disembodied” (Wenger 1998, pp. 47–8). Conversion (although this is not the only phenomenon to which these ideas apply) intertwines emotional responses, logical arguments, social relations, bodily actions, power dynamics, knowledge, and cultural traditions in ways that make it difficult to parse out what can be defined separately as information “behaviour” and information “practice.” While it is not within the scope of this project to advance the debate between these two theoretical lenses, it is worth considering the complementary value of both lenses to think more broadly about the various aspects that make up complex experiences such as embracing a new faith tradition and outlook on the world.

Extending inclusive definitions of information behaviour and practice is in line with proposals for more holistic conceptual frameworks in information scholarship (Savolainen, 2016). In his analysis of integrated models of information behaviour (namely, by Bates [2002], Choo et al. [2000], Godbold [2006], Robson & Robinson [2013, 2015], and Wilson [1994, 1997, 1999]),

72 Reckwitz defines knowledge in practice as “a particular way of ‘understanding the world’, which includes an understanding of objects (including abstract ones), of humans, of oneself. This way of understanding is largely implicit and largely historically-culturally specific” (2002, p. 253).
Savolainen argues that integrated models contribute to developing “more specific, more general or more comprehensive” (2016, p. 649) interpretations of information behaviour by bringing together previously disparate explanations, and identifying novel features or qualities of the phenomenon being studied (2016, pp. 648–9, p. 653). He concludes that an ideal integrated model would combine, for instance, aspects of information seeking situated in different contexts with the notion that information seeking can occur in linear stages or in multiple, cyclical directions (Savolainen, 2016, p. 669). Savolainen’s analysis outlines how information behaviour models have developed over the years – from models that focus specifically on information seeking and searching (e.g. Wilson, 1981), to models that leave room for less active and directed modes such as browsing and monitoring (e.g. Bates, 2002; Choo et al., 2000), to non-linear models that include exchange, creation, use, and avoidance (e.g. Godbold, 2006), and contextual, sociocultural factors such as communication, information provision, location, economics, and expertise (e.g. Robson & Robinson, 2015) (see Savolainen, 2016, pp. 664–5).

This integrative approach aligns with a recognition of the many elements of human experience that are involved in interacting with information – whether that is through searching, collecting, applying, organizing, or publishing (Savolainen, 2015). Despite these theoretical enhancements, human aspects of the body and beliefs remain noticeably absent. Although I do not propose a new scientific model or graphical illustration for explaining information behaviour or practice, my study of information seeking, evaluation, and sharing within the context of conversion to Islam – along with contemporary research by others that examines the relationships among information behaviour, spirituality, and embodiment (e.g., Gaston et al., 2015; Gorichanaz, 2016a; Latham, 2013; Michels, 2014; Siracky, 2013) – continues to develop the existing body of research on information behaviour in a similarly integrative way.

Participants’ experiences of converting to Islam in the GTA reveal that seeking, evaluating, and sharing information do not happen as discrete activities, but as interrelated and mutually supportive ways of learning about oneself and one’s place in the communities and world around
them – including how one is situated within local and global Muslim communities. Participants illustrated the significance of other people in their lives as information resources. While Olivier’s mentorship reflects an affinity with Sufi traditions of the intimate spiritual guidance communicated between teacher and disciple, Liam’s conversion was largely motivated by his desire to connect with and belong in his wife’s family, who he recognized as potential knowledge sources about this newly embraced religion. January’s introduction to Islam was largely circumstantial, as she initially learned about Islam from an employee of her parents while her family lived overseas. This person shared meaningful information with January, and they continued to stay in contact after she moved back to Canada. Even though Jennifer resisted the imposition of ideas from some members of her congregation, it is clear that peer believers – whether they were members of Jennifer’s local community or academics with whom she connected through their publications – have been a significant information source throughout her conversion experience. Other participants – namely, Hermione, Dahlia, Rachel, Aisha, Alexandra, Seif, Ruqayyah, Abdullah, and Kelly – experienced more serendipitous (i.e. unplanned) introductions to Islam through friends, family members, and teachers who shared interests, lifestyles, and aspects of Islam (e.g. the concept of charity) that resonated with them. Although these individuals were not necessarily intentionally chosen as information sources, they often served this purpose.

While Muslim converts are certainly influenced by the people, texts, and ideas with which they interact as part of their new faith communities, it is important to recognize their individual agency and contributions to reinventing this religious practice (Cox, 2012, p. 179; Pantzar & Shove, 2007) – for example, by creating new avenues for women’s participation in leading prayer and halaqas, advocating for spaces that are open to all genders and cultural backgrounds, and wearing hijab in ways that honour religious beliefs and personal style. For Muslim converts, seeking, evaluating, and sharing information (whether through written and creative works, conversation, or the body) not only increases their awareness about Islam, but is part of a

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73 Refer to Wenger’s work on learning as social participation, in which the author argues that the unit of analysis when studying identity should be on the “mutual constitution” of the community and the person (1998, p. 146).
continual practice of devotion and self-development and understanding. This follows Wenger’s argument that it is through participating in social practices that people negotiate their understanding of who they are (Wenger 1998; Cox 2012, p. 182). In Wenger’s words, learning is not merely “the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but the formation of an identity. Our experience and our membership inform each other, pull each other, transform each other” (1998, p. 96). Wenger’s emphasis on the mutually transformative power of personal experience and group membership resonates with the definition of religious identity introduced in Chapter Three: the style or expression of a person’s religious affiliation and values, which can be recognized through a person’s actions, rhetorical patterns and preferences, and through the ways others relate and respond to them. While I focus on what is “informational” about participants’ experiences in this thesis, it is not to discount or ignore the many other aspects of conversion and identity formation.

Indeed, rather than interpreting information-related activities as a separate part of Muslim converts’ experiences, the preceding findings support Cox’s argument for the idea of information in social practice (Cox, 2012). Thinking of information in social practice in this context means that Muslim converts’ identities are informed by their everyday responses to family, peers, and the public just as much as they are by more goal-oriented searches for information about, for instance, the history of mosques in Canada or instructions on how to pray. Like others who have explored identity formation in other contexts, such as professional training, and leisure and heritage language reading practices (Lloyd, 2007, 2009; Hanell, 2016; Westbrook, 2015; Rothbauer, 2004; Dali, 2013; Nomura & Caidi, 2013), this study’s findings affirm that identity is an emotional connection and way of being that is informed by participating in everyday social practices (Wenger, 1998). It is through learning and participating in “familiar, routine and communal” (Toğuşlu, 2015, p. 218) actions – the “less visible form of Islam” made up of “cooking, eating, drinking, using space and courtship practices” (Toğuşlu, 2015, p. 217) – that are part of daily life as a Muslim that converts develop their sense of who they are and what they believe. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that several participants indicated that

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74 Social practice is defined by Reckwitz as the “routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (2002, p. 250).
being Muslim (or being a “convert,” “revert,” or “new Muslim”) does not necessarily define who they are; they are simultaneously friends, parents, daughters and sons, teachers and students, Canadians and migrants. Identities are multifaceted and can be complementary; they are not mutually exclusive or fragmented, and are not confined to stage models (Chacko, 2015; DeHanas, 2016; Greifenhagen, 2014; Seitz, 2015). This understanding of identity can also apply outside of religious contexts.

Furthermore, conversion to Islam is a continuous process that cannot be limited to a single moment; nor is it confined to a strictly religious experience. Dahlia mentioned her ongoing list of books to read about Islam, Alexandra spoke about the “ongoing process” of learning and encountering new things about the history and practice of Islam, and Rachel said that seeking spiritual knowledge is “an ongoing journey.” Wenger aptly explains the continuous nature of identity formation as follows:

“The work of identity is always going on. Identity is not some primordial core of personality that already exists... our identity is something we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives... in social contexts… with respect to the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories” (1998, p. 154).

Conversion involves this kind of constant negotiation and renegotiation through ongoing social interaction; engaging with books, digital media, politics and institutions; personal contemplation; making decisions about what to wear and how to speak, and other everyday routines.

1.2 Constructing spiritual literacy

As defined in Chapter Three, spiritual literacy refers to the continuous, routine reading and writing practices that occur in private, among other believers, and at a broader level of religious institutions (Tolar Burton, 2008). This concept is connected to the preceding section in this chapter on how religious identities are informed by learning and participating in communities. Rather than being restricted to reading and writing, spiritual literacy can be extended to seeking, evaluating, and sharing information. Findings revealed that learning is central to converts articulating their identities as Muslims. While learning about Islamic history, traditions, prominent figures, and sacred texts are certainly part of conversion experiences, participants expressed that their trajectories have been more about learning to be Muslim than learning about
Islam *per se*. This process of learning to be and present oneself as Muslim is complicated by living in a geographic context (GTA, Canada) in which Christianity has historically shaped laws, government institutions, and educational systems. Abdullah referred to the interpretive work required when “Islamic law is silent” on a particular issue, and one needs to determine “what constitutes good conduct” based on local cultural norms. These experiences reflect Wenger’s premises about “learning as social participation” (1998, p. 4):

“1) We are social beings…
“2) Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises…
“3) Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.
“4) Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce” (Wenger 1998, p. 4).

Adding to these premises, Wenger defines identity as “a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (1998, p. 5). According to Wenger, learning is transformative – it changes “who we are and what we can do” (1998, p. 215). As a transformative practice, learning is a way to acquire the requisite skills and resources to form an identity (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). Moreover, the transformative practice of learning involves the following processes:

“*Evolving forms of mutual engagement*: discovering how to engage, what helps and what hinders; developing mutual relationships; defining identities, establishing who is who, who is good at what, who knows what, who is easy or hard to get along with.

“*Understanding and tuning their enterprise*: aligning their engagement with it, and learning to become and hold each other accountable to it; struggling to define the enterprise and reconciling conflicting interpretations of what the enterprise is about.

“*Developing their repertoire, styles, and discourses*: renegotiating the meaning of various elements; producing or adopting tools, artifacts, representations; recording and recalling events; inventing new terms and redefining or abandoning old ones; telling and retelling stories; creating and breaking routines” (Wenger 1998, p. 95).

For Muslim converts, “forms of mutual engagement” include learning to follow rules or instructions to act appropriately in a situation – what Schatzki calls “practical understanding” (Cox, 2012, p. 178) or what Durkheim described as a “norm-oriented theory of action” (Reckwitz 2002, p. 245). For example, Abdullah shared the following anecdote about being critiqued for wearing three-quarter-length shorts:
“I was in [Middle Eastern country] at my aunt’s house … After a couple of days she was like, ‘It doesn’t really look good on you. It’s not really dignified’ … There are Islamic rules that you are not supposed to cross.”

Religious codes of conduct apply not only to what is considered as normal and appropriate attire, but also to the ways in which Muslims are expected to determine the validity and authenticity of scholarly opinions and textual sources such as hadith (e.g. through what Rachel referred to as hadith science). Wenger’s discussion of “understanding and tuning their enterprise” relates to the role of media and rhetoric in shaping Muslim converts’ spirituality and ideas about religious authority. Particularly in a contemporary context in which conflicting interpretations about Islam and Muslims play out prominently across news coverage and public debates, a significant part of embracing Islam is reconciling these different perspectives to understand what this religion stands for. Finally, Muslim converts develop their “repertoire, styles, and discourses” by learning from their peers, families, friends, teachers, and mentors, and by innovating new ways to represent their religious commitments. 75 Here, it is important to remember that discourse does not only refer to speech or written texts. As Reckwitz points out, “a discursive practice also contains bodily patterns, routinized mental activities – forms of understanding, know-how (here, including grammar and pragmatic rules of use), and motivation – and above all, objects (from sounds to computers) that are linked to each other” (Reckwitz 2002, pp. 254–5). It is through enacting accepted discourses that Muslim converts may become authorities themselves. By demonstrating their awareness of and adherence to normative patterns of behaviour – including clothing, vocabulary, level of participation in worship, and evaluating sources – Muslim converts establish their social capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Savolainen, 2008, pp. 184–197). Although these repertoires are rehearsed, they can also be used to produce new meanings (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). Among the participants in this project, Abdullah’s and January’s khutbah are arguably among the most obvious examples of displaying authority. Yet it is important to also acknowledge the authority evident in subtler instances such as correcting and critiquing peer believers, as in the case of the exchange about nail polish that happened at the convert discussion group (refer to

75 Wenger defines repertoire as the “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice… It includes the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members” (1998, p. 83).
Chapter Eight). Moreover, Muslim converts produce representations of their understandings of what a Muslim is and what Islam is through their creative pursuits, bodies, and published materials. Unlike epiphanies recounted in stories such as Paul on the road to Damascus, participants in this project construct their spiritual literacies like a building – block by block, over time. As these practices develop, so too does their understanding of their religious selves. Information practices such as finding information online, assessing its credibility, and sharing creative work are critical strategies for learning to become Muslim, and articulating what being a member of Muslim communities means to each person.

1.3 Social world beyond regional borders

“We define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and of manifesting broader styles and discourses” (Wenger 1998, p. 149).

As discussed earlier, Muslim converts develop their religious identities with reference to local and global sources of knowledge and influence. Their experiences of identity formation are informed by simultaneously navigating politics, local communities and institutions, and online networks. Their interactions on- and off-line are further complicated by their affiliation with a religion that is not connected to the dominant sociopolitical system in the GTA – including municipal, provincial, and federal governments that are officially separate from religion yet with statutory holidays rooted in Christianity, and a public education system that teaches predominantly a Euro-Christian-centric curriculum (Zine, 2001). As social computing researchers Oliver Haimson and Anna Lauren Hoffmann suggest, challenges to self-presentation online are “most sharply felt by those who express or carry certain marginalized or non-normative identities – especially those that may be socially or culturally stigmatized” (2016; see also Goffman, 1963). For Muslim converts at this historical moment, even living in a geographic context that prides itself for its inclusive and pluralistic attitudes, figuring out how to represent oneself in local communities can be a difficult and confusing process.

Part of the challenge of deciding how to represent oneself stems from the pressure (mentioned earlier) to account for the actions of those who use Islam as a justification for violence – in
Canada and in other parts of the globe. As newcomers to the faith, Muslim converts are simultaneously faced with the need to learn as much as possible about Islam (its history, internal divisions, interfaith relations, power and gender dynamics, scriptural interpretations, etc.) as part of their own spiritual trajectories, and in order to form opinions as quickly as possible about world events that are tied to the religion they have embraced. For example, Liam mentioned how he responded to a client at work who made a comment about Islam that was “very narrow, misinformed, for lack of a better word, a little racist” by carefully talking to him about a “really well-spoken imam” he heard on the radio that morning to “counter his narrow idea of what Muslims are.” In Wenger’s words, “joining a community of practice involves entering not only its internal configuration but also its relations with the rest of the world” (1998, p. 103). For Muslim converts in the GTA, relating with “the rest of the world” means becoming knowledgeable, taking a stand, and engaging in conversations and debates about issues such as radicalization, religious justifications for oppressing women, and legislation on visible religious symbols while they are continuously informing themselves about their religion. Thus, conversion to Islam in this particular geographic context is not a one-time event marking life “before” and “after” becoming Muslim, but an ongoing process of learning a new religious practice beyond what is familiar in a predominantly Christian society and engaging in this process of learning despite (or in response to) stigma.

At the same time, digital media can help to facilitate information sharing, networking, and identity construction with peer believers beyond the GTA (Campbell, 2012; Siraj, 2016; Helland, 2014; Wolf, 2016; Hogan, 2010). While networking happens in person as well, it is increasingly through participating in digital platforms that Muslim converts define and express their religious identities in relation to other Muslims around the world. This engagement with digital and social media resonates with Wenger’s discussion of how participation and non-participation shape:

“1) How we locate ourselves in a social landscape, 2) what we care about and what we neglect, 3) what we attempt to know and understand and what we choose to ignore, 4) with whom we seek connections and whom we avoid, 5) how we engage and direct our energies, 6) how we attempt to steer our trajectories” (Wenger 1998, pp. 167–8).
Whether it is by listening to podcasts, watching scholars and speakers on YouTube, having conversations and debates on Facebook and Twitter, sharing photos and joining support groups on WhatsApp, following blogs and forums, or reading online magazines, digital media offer useful tools for learning about, negotiating, and expressing religious commitments, and connecting with peers on local and global scales. Through digital media, Muslim converts can draw from and share discursive resources across the “constellations of practices” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 126–131) that link and mutually inform local individuals and communities and the global ummah.  

2 Scholarly Contributions

By exploring the experiences of Muslim converts in the GTA, this study increases attention to spirituality in research on information practice. In particular, it sheds light on religious identity as an important part of how people define and express themselves – including how it translates to everyday interactions with information. Despite prevalent interreligious conflict, efforts to engage in interfaith dialogue and collaboration (e.g. campus multi-faith centres, The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, ISNA’s National Interfaith and Government Forum), and growing trends such as mindfulness and meditation, spirituality has been largely ignored by information researchers (with exceptions such as Siracky, 2013; Kari & Hartel, 2007; Michels, 2014; the Center for the Study of Information and Religion at Kent State University; Gaston et al., 2015; and Gorichanaz, 2016a). Attending to information practice in a religious context helps to broaden an understanding of processes such as information seeking, evaluation, and sharing that takes into account the significance of serendipitous discovery, emotions attached to finding

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76 In describing communities of practice as constellations, Wenger uses the term to refer to “a grouping of stellar objects that are seen as a configuration even though they may not be particularly close to one another, of the same kind, or of the same size. A constellation is a particular way of seeing them as related, one that depends on the perspective one adopts” (1998, p. 127). He goes on to list some of the possible reasons for considering how communities of practice might be perceived as constellations, as follows: “(1) sharing historical roots 2) having related enterprises 3) serving a cause or belonging to an institution 4) facing similar conditions 5) having members in common 6) sharing artifacts 7) having geographical relations of proximity or interaction 8) having overlapping styles or discourses 9) competing for the same resources” (Wenger 1998, p. 127).
resources at the right time, and cultivating networks with other believers across time and space (i.e. historical writers and materials, connecting online across geographic borders).

At a time when debates about Islam and in “the West” continue, the descriptive, experiential findings included here can help to foster empathy by moving away from relying on stereotypical assumptions about Muslims living in a North American metropolis. This empathy is especially important for social and information policy makers, teachers, and librarians, who make decisions about public services, housing, and citizenship; control information access; educate children, youth, and adults; organize resources; and facilitate information literacy.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the information practice literature by integrating the arts-based technique of timeline drawings. As explained in Chapter Four, the timeline drawings were a visual method to elicit participants’ reflections on critical moments, texts and people that affected their conversion experiences. The rationale for using this method was to capture details that may not have been accessed through conventional interviewing and fieldwriting techniques (refer to Causey, 2016 for precedents of drawing as an ethnographic method outside of information science). Moreover, using timeline drawings in concert with narrative interviews was partly inspired by Kari and Hartel’s call for information scholars to draw from other disciplines that have more established foundations for studying spirituality and other “higher things in life” (Kari & Hartel, 2007). While participants’ processes of completing the timeline drawings were illuminating, the finished drawings also served as products for facilitating conversation throughout follow-up interviews. Although the value of arts-based methods is starting to be recognized and such methods are beginning to be used in information science (e.g., Hartel, 2014; Hartel & Savolainen, 2016; Julien et al., 2013), they remain an underused technique.

Since this study reveals that strategies of seeking, evaluating, and sharing information in the context of conversion to Islam are affected by social relations, power dynamics, embodied learning, emotional responses, and logical decision-making, it extends a holistic, multi-faceted way of framing information practice. In terms of social relations and power dynamics, this study points to the need for mentoring and peer support to navigate resources and systems, with
precedents for this form of guidance and teaching in some Islamic traditions (e.g. the emphasis placed on the close relationship between spiritual guide/teacher and disciple/learner in many Sufi orders). By highlighting this social dimension of information practice, this study builds on ideas inspired by critical theorist Jürgen Habermas and Elfreda Chatman about information in social worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). In particular, this study’s findings echo the following five interrelated and mutually influential social elements:

“1. Social norms, a world's shared sense of the appropriateness of social appearances and observable behaviors;
2. Social types, the roles that define actors and how they are perceived within a world;
3. Information value, a world's shared sense of a scale of the importance of information;
4. Information behavior, the full range of behaviors and activities related to information available to members of a world; [and]
5. Boundaries, the places at which information worlds come into contact with each other and across which communication and information exchange can – but may or not – take place” (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010, p. 8, emphasis added).

These social elements are evident in practices that participants in this study described. For instance, the approved methods for assessing a source’s authenticity and trustworthiness – what Rachel referred to as “hadith science” – reflect social norms (shared sense of what behaviours are appropriate), social types (who is defined or perceived as having the authority to distinguish an authentic hadith from a non-authentic one), information value (shared sense of the importance of particular hadith collections), information behaviour (activities related to the process of assessing a hadith’s authenticity), and boundaries (established ground rules for exchanging information between, e.g., men and women, teachers and students, religious leaders and lay people).

The context of conversion to Islam in the GTA also reveals that information can be carried through materials and human bodies. Communicating beliefs through the kind of clothing one wears (e.g. niqab, hijab, abaya) in public spaces, artifacts displayed in one’s home (e.g. framed Arabic calligraphy and supplicatory prayers on printed cards hanging on the walls, the Quran intentionally placed on a reverent part of a bookcase or side table), and physical postures enacted when praying point to the experiential and embodied character of information practice throughout the conversion process. Finally, participants’ experiences support the idea that information practice involves activities that happen both serendipitously (e.g. reading a work of
fiction only to find that it allows for a spiritual experience or conveys a message that resonates with a personal situation), and systematically (e.g. organizing a personal collection of books in specific categories or sections in an effort to develop an understanding of Islam and one’s place within this religion). In contrast with information behaviour literature that suggests that people look for, evaluate, and share information to meet a predetermined information need or goal (e.g. answering a single question, solving a problem, or locating a document), this study suggests that the context of conversion to Islam in the GTA reveals the gradual, continuous nature of information practice in everyday life, which is affected by emotional, sociocultural, and material elements.

Although this study’s findings are not statistically representative of all Muslim converts in the GTA or on a broader scale, this holistic framing can apply to information research in other spiritual contexts, and has potential for future studies of profound events and pursuits. Because this study focuses on information practice running “orthogonal” (Bates, 2007) to religious conversion – that is, offering a meta perspective from information science, rather than adopting a subject-specific theological lens to focus on the phenomenon of conversion per se – the findings have the potential to be more widely applicable across different contexts where information seeking, evaluation and sharing occur. Given this study’s focus on the continuous and transitional nature of information practice throughout participants’ conversion experiences, its findings contribute to building a theoretical foundation about how decisions are made in other transitional situations and continuous pursuits that may be unrelated to religion. These include migration and settlement; bereavement; health information provision for pregnant women, new parents, transgender people, and people experiencing critical illness and recovery; engagement in ongoing artistic, athletic and creative “serious leisure” activities (Cox & Blake, 2011; Hartel, 2010; Stebbins, 2007); learning a new profession or hobby; and navigating a major career change.

This study also addresses the limited attention given to information practice in research on religious conversion. By drawing on anthropological and sociological studies of conversion to understand the distinct characteristics of information practice in this context, this study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship. While some studies of conversion allude to
information activities, this study specifically names and examines such activities. Participants’ accounts of finding resources serendipitously, annotating texts, filtering through opinions online, assessing book recommendations and critiques from peers, categorizing personal libraries and photo albums, producing artwork and writing sermons, and deciding how to dress indicate that information seeking, evaluation, and sharing are not a tangential part of conversion, but are integral to participants’ religious experiences. This study’s findings on reading practices contribute new insights about the spiritual rewards that participants felt could be gained from reading not only designated “religious” texts (e.g. *Quran, hadith*), but also books from other traditions and genres, including fiction, non-fiction, memoir, and scholarly interpretations. Participants also reflected on how their sense of spirituality and religious identity was supported not by reading alone, but also by annotating texts and developing and distributing reading lists. These findings add to an often overlooked aspect of information behaviour, and have potential interest to reading studies scholars. That said, it is important to remember that the women and men who volunteered to take part in this project are well-integrated into education systems, with the majority having completed at least one post-secondary degree.

3 Practical Implications

On a practical level, this study’s in-depth exploration of the various ways in which Muslim converts learn their religion and express their identities works towards countering negative stereotypes that associate Muslim converts with exclusively alienated, violent people in crisis or persons coerced to change their religion for marriage. The descriptive findings highlighted in this study may also inform government policy decisions on citizenship, surveillance, security, and multiculturalism (e.g. Bill C-51), and dissuade policymakers from proposing and moving forward legislation that stigmatizes and discriminates against individuals and groups on the basis of their religious beliefs (e.g. Quebec’s proposed “Charter of Values” and Bill 62, and decisions about wearing the *niqab* and other visible religious symbols during citizenship ceremonies and in other public places). This is not to dismiss the real concerns of alienation and isolation among Muslim converts within and beyond the GTA. Given the prominence of social media in Muslim converts’ everyday lives (as described in the Context and findings chapters) – especially among youth – and the widespread use of social media by radicalized networks to recruit young
converts (Khan, 2016), this study lends further support for the need for convert support groups, multi-faith centres, chaplaincies, MSAs, and mosques to establish or build their online presence to connect converts with resources that draw awareness to the nuances and diversity within Islam and facilitate connections with members of local and global Muslim communities to ask questions and share ideas. Additionally, this study points to the need for more accessible in-person opportunities for Muslim converts to learn about Islam, explore their faith, and meet other Muslims in a safe and welcoming environment. This accessibility means more programs offered off-campus and in urban centres, in addition to the existing programs made available through university and college MSAs and retreat centres located in suburban areas. Community leaders may consider collaborating with existing chaplaincies and student organizations based at local colleges and universities to provide programs off-campus and in downtown areas, while reducing time and financial resources associated with establishing brand new programs. Organizations may also consider canvassing volunteers with expertise in digital media to ensure that websites provide up-to-date information about events. These volunteers could also work with organizations to develop regular email newsletters to communicate announcements, and build opportunities for online communication through existing tools (e.g. groups on social media platforms). Volunteers should be able to commit to long-term involvement and/or succession planning so that online platforms are as sustainable as possible. Whenever it is feasible, in-person events and programs should be inclusive to Muslims who identify with different denominations, to encourage intra-faith dialogue (as Hermione suggested) and reduce the sense of isolation and alienation that some minority Muslims feel, particularly when they are new to the community. When providing advice to converts, chaplains and imams should be mindful of information needs in addition to spiritual and emotional ones, offering guidance on where to find relevant resources, and how to critically assess the credibility and trustworthiness of these resources.

The regional focus of this study offers a deeper awareness of the information experiences of Muslims in the GTA. This awareness is particularly relevant at a time when Toronto and other major Canadian cities are welcoming refugees from Syria and neighbouring countries in the
Middle East.\footnote{Similar considerations apply elsewhere. For example, in the U.S. in 2016, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded a one-year planning grant collaboration between the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Mortenson Center for International Library Programs and the American Library Association (ALA) to “address the information needs of refugees and asylum seekers in order to support and empower them in their resettlement and integration process” (Project Welcome, 2016) by assessing library service gaps and developing “recommendations and an action agenda on information resources, services, training, and research needed to support” this process (Project Welcome, 2016).} This study’s attention to converts’ experiences of feeling invisible in Muslim communities yet uncomfortably visible in the public sphere suggests an in-between-ness that may allow converts to play an important role as connectors between non-Muslim “mainstream society” and Muslim migrants by helping to navigate the GTA while sharing their mutual understanding of Islamic values and practices, cultural customs, and language. As Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core, noted: “Even a casual perusal of The New York Times on any given day illustrates that religious diversity issues – from diplomacy across religious divides to tailoring public-health campaigns to particular religious communities – are just as challenging as other identity issues” (2016). Indeed, further research on religious diversity and identity – particularly as they relate to information behaviour and practice – is critically needed to extend scholarship on an important aspect of human life and contribute to a more inclusive society.

For information professionals, this study draws attention to participants’ limited use of libraries, which as noted in Chapter Seven, points to the continued need to communicate the value of libraries and librarians for supporting information literacy and access to materials for religious leaders and adherents at any stage of their spiritual lives. Meanwhile, this study suggests that it is not only libraries and information professionals who provide access to resources and information literacy instruction. Indeed, Muslim converts also receive instruction about how to assess and find information from speakers at religious courses and conventions, from chaplains at their institutions, and from imams and community leaders. Given the emergence of “human libraries” and this study’s findings about how converts access information online and through mentors, libraries could consider providing information in alternative formats, such as online resource (lib) guides, audio books, and access to online lectures and podcasts. Libraries may also be able to provide accessible, centrally located spaces on campuses and in urban centres for educational programs (e.g. public lectures and seminars) and networking events where converts and non-Muslims can share stories and learn about Islam from each other and from chaplains, imams, and
community leaders. Additionally, libraries may include spaces to exhibit artistic works that explore and showcase the plurality of Muslim identities (e.g. in a similar approach to Myseum of Toronto’s “Cosmopolis Toronto: The World in One City” photography exhibition which features migrants from various countries at public library branches across the city, and photographer Samra Habib’s exhibition, “Just Me and Allah: Photographs of Queer Muslims,” at Toronto Public Library’s Parliament and Gerrard branch in the summer of 2016). Furthermore, participants’ stories about the significance of personal reflection, quiet reading, and contemplation for their overall well-being and self-acceptance suggests that libraries can offer important spaces for these activities, in spite of the growing trend towards designing libraries with spaces for collaborative activities and technical innovation (e.g. 3D printing and innovation hubs, radio broadcasting centres). Participants’ expressed need for accessible prayer spaces also affirms the value of introducing multi-faith prayer and meditation spaces to public and academic libraries. In addition to its implications for theory and practice, this study’s attention to converts’ information seeking, evaluation, and sharing activities has broader relevance to community leaders and organizations that develop programs and host events to support newcomers in transition (within and outside of religious contexts), plan and implement awareness campaigns, design curricula, and manage resource collections.

This study’s findings align with a movement in Canadian public libraries towards “swapping information for experience” (Stevenson et al., 2016) by supporting different ways of communicating information than simply providing access to written materials. These include networking, relating, talking, bringing in expertise, sharing stories, delivering programs, and providing instruction on how to navigate the wealth of resources available in print and online (Stevenson et al., 2016). Additionally, they lend support to public libraries’ mandate to focus on marginalized and socially excluded individuals through outreach in communities (Stevenson et al., 2016; Dali, 2017). As stated above, this study affirms the notion that the role of libraries should not be simply about meeting specific information needs. Instead, libraries must focus on connecting with their communities and forming meaningful relationships with their patrons. This study may help local library and information workers to understand the pressures that Muslim converts in the GTA are under to navigate the often overwhelming variety of organizations and communities that have different levels of inclusivity, and different approaches to worship and
religious education. Participants’ experiences can also help library and information workers to be mindful of the broader context in which Muslim converts live (e.g. possible family tensions resulting from “coming out” as Muslim – depending on family members’ assumptions about Islam and Muslims; the apparent rise in Islamophobic statements made by some politicians, and acts of violence on college and university campuses and public spaces), and the plurality of information needs and practices among Muslims, including those who self-identify as converts or reverts. As noted in Chapter Three, librarians and community service providers can work towards social inclusion by supporting people in navigating and facilitating access to complex “information landscapes” (Gorichanaz, 2015; Lloyd, 2006; Lloyd, 2014; Lloyd et al., 2013) where information is exchanged and interpreted and where social networks are formed.

4 Limitations and Areas for Future Research

As discussed in Chapter 4, ethnographic research should be assessed based on a different set of evaluation criteria from positivist approaches (e.g. replicability, reliability, validity). Specifically, ethnographic research findings should be plausible, credible, and relevant (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 117; Hammersley, 1990, pp. 57–70). Although findings about human behaviour and experiences cannot be replicated in the same way as laboratory-based experiments, claims made by ethnographic researchers can be evaluated based on how plausible they seem, given the described characteristics of the research context, researcher, and participants (Hammersley, 1990). The research account’s credibility to readers and participants refers to whether the evidence presented to support claims is reasonably convincing and trustworthy (Hammersley, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Relevance refers to whether the research findings are important to gain a better understanding about an issue of public concern, and/or have implications for scholarship and practice (Hammersley, 1990). Participants’ conversion narratives – even when they recall events that happened over a year before they were told – reveal broader concerns about information practice in experiences of transition. These responses have value not for their precise recollection of objective, historical facts, but for their capacity to highlight insights about information practice in the context of a religious transition, which may apply to other settings (i.e. they are transferable). As sociologist Kristin Luker suggests, qualitative social science researchers are not so much concerned with
“the veracity of the interviews… as we are in the deep truth of them… what interests us is that people chose to tell us that they happened that way” (2008, p. 167). Instead of trying to confirm that events happened the way participants said they did, my research focused on the meanings and significance that participants “attach to situations, others, things” (Shaffir, 1999, p. 23).

While I did not have pre-existing relationships with the communities and individuals involved in fieldwork, I strived to continuously reflect on the possibility that my expectations and theoretical assumptions might influence the process of generating and interpreting data (Gross & Latham, 2011). My fieldnotes and analytic memos provided tools for these reflections, along with including space for my observations about field visits and interviews. Guided by an interpretive ethnographic approach throughout fieldwork, I focused on actively listening to participants, both in observing social dynamics at events and during interviews. I reminded myself to hear participants’ points of view, even when they did not align with my own on certain issues (e.g. gender segregation, marriage equality). Although I had research questions in mind, I tried to facilitate interviews in a flexible manner that enabled participants to focus on issues and experiences that were most meaningful to them. At the same time, I was careful to maintain boundaries to minimize the potential effects of rapport on my interpretations, such as compromising critical analysis (Maier & Monahan, 2010). While participants and I worked to create interview environments built on mutual trust and open dialogue, our relationships were limited to the research setting (i.e. they did not extend into our personal lives).

Because of this study’s small sample size, absences are inherent in the research design and findings (which were not intended to be generalizable). Such absences include – though are not limited to – Muslim converts who self-identify as LGBTQ+. While participants’ cultural and racial identities are diverse, most of the participants in this study self-identified as heterosexual, university-educated, and aligned with mainstream branches or denominations of Islam. This meant that marginal and marginalized voices – including members of Ahmadiyya, Ismaili, and Salafi groups and movements – were excluded. Future research on the relationship between information practice and conversion among marginalized Muslims, youth under 18, adults over 45, and those living in different geographic areas (e.g. rural Canada and U.S., outside of North America) would offer fascinating comparisons and a more robust basis to contextualize future
quantitative research, and research that adopts critical theory and participatory action approaches.

Additionally, further research on gender and information practice in religious contexts could extend findings from this study, which point to gender as a factor in religious information experience but do not draw upon gender as a main sensitizing concept to frame the study. Conversion among women is a topic that has already been extensively studied (see, e.g., Galman, 2013; Haddad, 2006; Mansson McGinty, 2006; Soutar, 2010; van Nieuwkerk, 2008; Woodlock, 2010), but more attention is needed to the relationship between gender identity and the ways in which people look for, assess, and circulate resources. Other areas for future research include digital ethnography (i.e. how newcomers to Islam and other religions engage in conversations and debates, establish transnational networks, and influence followers online); the impact of migration on conversion (which is especially relevant with the global refugee crisis, and xenophobic government policies as demonstrated by the Brexit campaign, U.S. President Donald Trump, and Dutch anti-immigration politician Geert Wilders); conversion from Islam to other traditions, including atheism (e.g. Ex-Muslims of North America); and information sharing, programming decisions, and recordkeeping practices among da’wah and convert support organizations. While I was mindful of the “peculiarities” (Takhteyev, 2012, p. 8) of my research setting, one of the advantages of situated, ethnographic research in one place is that it provides detailed illustrations of patterns of practice that may be identified elsewhere (ibid.).

Chapter Summary
This concluding chapter revisited research questions, provided an overview of findings generated from participants’ accounts and my observations as recorded in fieldnotes, and connected them to theoretical insights about interrelated processes of religious conversion, socialization, and learning. It organized this analysis according to three key sensitizing concepts: informing the self through religious practice, constructing spiritual literacy, and social world beyond regional borders. Findings counter widespread assumptions about conversion as an uncritical choice motivated only by marriage or a personal crisis. They also reinforce the idea that information is central to religious change and transition, especially in a shift as politicized as conversion to
Islam. After linking findings to ideas about learning as an everyday practice rather than something that only happens in a classroom, and to information as an embedded part of social life, this chapter concluded by considering this study’s practical implications for librarians and information professionals, chaplains and program developers, and policymakers, and avenues for future research.
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Glossary

**abaya**
A loose, robe-like garment that covers the body from shoulders to feet and is worn by some Muslim women.

**azhan**
Regional variations include *adhan, azan, ezan*. Derived from the Arabic root, *adhina*, which means to listen. Islamic call to prayer, which is recited by a designated caller/muezzin (often, over a loudspeaker) five times throughout the day to alert Muslims to worship.

**Sahih Bukhari**
A collection of *hadith* that is widely considered to be authentic, based on the chain of narration (*sanad*) and the text (*matn*) being well documented (Tlaiss, 2015, p. 861). Along with *Sahih Muslim*, it is the most frequently used source of *hadith* (Basit, 2012).

**da‘wah**
Translated from the Arabic verb, “to invite” or “to summon,” *da‘wah* is widely interpreted by Muslims as the practice of evangelizing about Islam as a way of inviting people to submit to faith in Allah (Poston, 1992, pp. 3-4).

**du‘a**
Literally translated as “invocation.” An act of worship through supplication to fulfill a need, seek forgiveness, or increase faith.

**hadith**
Literally translated as “speech.” Recorded sayings and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

**iftar**
Evening meal to break daily fast with family and community members during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

**istikhara**
Prayer recited for divine guidance on a particular personal intention, issue or decision.

**khutbah**
Public sermon presented at the Friday congregational prayer and Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

**Mathnawi**
Alternative spellings include *The Masnavi, Ma‘nawi*. Famous collection of mystical poems and stories in “spiritual couplets” by 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, which advises readers on pursuing divine love and living a meaningful life.
**shahadah**
 Defined by Köse as the “declaration of faith,” which includes accepting “the oneness of God, and the Prophet Muhammad as His last messenger” (Köse, 1994, p. 198).

**wudhu**
 Literally translated as “ablution.” Ritual washing before daily prayers, which involves specific steps including mental preparation by beginning with a spiritual intention.
Appendices

Appendix A. Informed Consent Letter (Individual Participants)

Dear [participant’s name],

My name is Elysia Guzik and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. I am interested in learning about your experience of embracing Islam. For my doctoral dissertation, I am studying how Muslim converts/reverts seek, evaluate and share information that supports them in their conversion experiences and helps them come to know what it means to be Muslim. Participants in this study meet the following criteria:

- Self-identification as a convert or revert to Islam;
- 18 years of age or older;
- Resident in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA);
- Comfortable communicating in English;
- Interested in sharing conversion experiences and associated information practices.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews, the first taking approximately 30 minutes, and the follow-up taking approximately 60 minutes (depending on how much you would like to discuss). The first interview will include a general conversation about how you came to embrace Islam. The follow-up interview will have a more detailed focus on how you look for information and learn about Muslim identity, and will include a timeline drawing exercise. Interviews will take place at a location that is convenient for you, such as a meeting room at a local mosque, da’wah centre, public library, or your home.

While there is no compensation associated with your participation in this study, you may find that focused conversations about and reflections upon your conversion experience will increase awareness of your spirituality, and offer an opportunity to highlight the diversity within Islam which is often overlooked by mainstream media.

To help interviews flow smoothly and ensure that I remember the details of your responses, interviews will be audio-recorded – unless you prefer otherwise. I will transcribe and review our interviews when I prepare my research findings.
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions, and may withdraw your participation at any time, without any negative consequences. If you decide to withdraw from the study, I will remove any information that you have shared from the project. (Please note that the exception to this is in the case that research findings have already been presented or published.)

Your identity and all information that you share will be kept confidential and anonymous. I will collect your phone number and/or email address for the purpose of confirming our interview appointments, and sharing my research findings with you. If you request that interviews take place at your home, I will also need to collect your home address. I will refer to you using a pseudonym (fake name) that we will create together. I will also use pseudonyms to refer to any persons or organizations that you mention during our conversations. Data collected as part of this study will be kept securely in locked filing cabinets and on a password-protected computer and encrypted USB for an indefinite length of time, to allow for the completion of my dissertation and subsequent academic presentations and publications based on my doctoral research. I will store any documents that link you to your pseudonym, contact information, and family members in a secure location separate from the remaining data collection. When the final dissertation is completed, a summary of the research findings and a link to my dissertation will be offered to you.

* * *

Please indicate your consent to the following, using a checkmark in front of the relevant option:

1. Being audio-recorded while conducting interviews:
   - Yes
   - No

2. Completing a timeline drawing exercise as part of the interview, which will offer an opportunity for you to creatively express your conversion experience and information practices that have been part of this process.
   - Yes
   - No

3. Using excerpts from interview transcripts in the presentation of research.
   - Yes
   - No

4. Using completed timeline drawings in the presentation of research.
   - Yes
   - No

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Elysia Guzik, at 647-980-0532 or by email at elysia.guzik@mail.utoronto.ca.
If you have any further questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca. You may also contact the researcher’s supervisor, Dr. Jenna Hartel, at 416-978-3234 or by email at jenna.hartel@utoronto.ca.

I, ______________________________ [participant’s name], am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this study as stated above and the possible risks that may result from it (e.g. potentially feeling anxious or uncomfortable when describing my conversion to Islam or being reminded of difficult aspects of this experience). I acknowledge that the researcher has explained the study and that I have been given an opportunity to have my questions about the study answered. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I also acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent letter and form.

Signature: ______________________________ Date: __________________


Appendix B. Informed Consent Letter (Family Members)

Dear [family member’s name],

My name is Elysia Guzik and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. I am interested in learning about your [family member]’s experience of embracing Islam. For my doctoral dissertation, I am studying how Muslim converts/reverts seek, evaluate and share information that supports them in their conversion experiences and helps them come to know what it means to be Muslim. To better understand conversion experiences from family members’ perspectives, you are invited to participate in this study. You may participate in the study if you are:

- A family member of a convert or revert to Islam;
- 18 years of age or older;
- A resident in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA); and
- Comfortable communicating in English.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes (depending on how much you would like to discuss). The interview will include a general conversation about your religious background, and how you have affected your [family member]’s conversion experience and associated information practices. Interviews will take place at a location that is convenient for you, such as a meeting room at a local mosque, da’wah centre, public library, or your home.

While there is no compensation associated with your participation in this study, you may find that focused conversations about and reflections upon your [family member]’s conversion experience will increase awareness of your own faith and that of your [family member]’s, and offer an opportunity to highlight the diversity within Islam which is often overlooked by mainstream media.

To help interviews flow smoothly and ensure that I remember the details of your responses, the interview will be audio-recorded – unless you prefer otherwise. I will transcribe and review our interviews when I prepare my research findings.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions, and may withdraw your participation at any time, without any negative consequences. If you decide to withdraw from the study, I will remove any information that you have shared from the project. (Please note that the exception to this is in the case that research findings have already been presented or published.)
Your identity and all information that you share will be kept confidential and anonymous. I will collect your phone number and/or email address for the purpose of confirming our interview appointments, and sharing my research findings with you. If you request that interviews take place at your home, I will also need to collect your home address. I will refer to you using a pseudonym (fake name) that we will create together. I will also use pseudonyms to refer to any persons or organizations that you mention during our conversations. Data collected as part of this study will be kept securely in locked filing cabinets and on a password-protected computer and encrypted USB for an indefinite length of time, to allow for the completion of my dissertation and subsequent academic presentations and publications based on my doctoral research. I will store any documents that link you to your pseudonym, contact information, and family members in a secure location separate from the remaining data collection. When the final dissertation is completed, a summary of the research findings and a link to my dissertation will be offered to you.

* * *

Please indicate your consent to the following, using a checkmark in front of the relevant option:

1. Being audio-recorded during the interview.
   Yes   No

2. Using excerpts from the interview transcript in the presentation of research.
   Yes   No

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Elysia Guzik, at 647-980-0532 or by email at elysia.guzik@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you have any further questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca. You may also contact the researcher’s supervisor, Dr. Jenna Hartel, at 416-978-3234 or by email at jenna.hartel@utoronto.ca.

I, _____________________________ [family member’s name], am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this study as stated above and the possible risks that may result from it (e.g. potentially feeling anxious or uncomfortable when describing my [family member]’s conversion to Islam or being reminded of difficult aspects of this experience). I acknowledge that the researcher has explained the study and that I have been given an opportunity to have my questions about the study answered. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I also acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent letter and form.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix C. Informed Consent Letter (Organizations)

Dear [name of organization leader],

My name is Elysia Guzik and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. I am interested in learning about experiences of embracing Islam. For my dissertation, I am studying how Muslim converts/reverts seek, evaluate and share information that supports them in their spiritual journey and helps them come to know what it means to be Muslim.

I am in the initial exploratory phase (pilot study) of my research, and am hoping to meet Muslim converts/reverts in the GTA and speak with them at programs and events catered to Muslims interested in learning more about Islam, and Muslim converts/reverts who are seeking social support and opportunities to learn about their faith. This pilot study will help me to establish connections with prospective research participants and refine the design of my research.

Prospective participants are eligible to take part in the study if they:
- Self-identify as a convert or revert to Islam;
- Are 18 years of age or older;
- Live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA);
- Are comfortable communicating in English; and
- Are interested in sharing conversion experiences and associated information practices.

Individuals who choose to take part in this study will be asked to participate in two interviews, the first taking approximately 30 minutes, and the follow-up taking approximately 60 minutes (depending on how much they would like to discuss). The first interview will include a general conversation about how the person came to embrace Islam. The follow-up interview will have a more detailed focus on how the person looks for information and learns about Muslim identity, and will include a timeline drawing exercise and a guided tour of a space that is meaningful to their conversion experience. Between interviews, participants will be given an opportunity to complete a brief journaling activity. Interviews will take place at a location that is convenient for participants, such as a meeting room at a local mosque, da‘wah centre, or public library.

While there is no compensation associated participating in this study, participants may find that focused conversations about and reflections upon their conversion experiences will increase awareness of their spirituality, and offer an opportunity to highlight the diversity within Islam which is often overlooked by mainstream media.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants may refuse to answer any questions, and may withdraw their participation at any time, without any negative consequences. If participants decide to withdraw from the study, I will remove information that they have
shared from the project. (Please note that the exception to this is in the case that research findings have already been presented or published.)

Identities of participants and Muslim organizations with which they may be associated, in addition to information that is shared in interviews and conversations, will be kept confidential and anonymous. I will refer to participants and place names using pseudonym (fake names). Data collected as part of this study will be destroyed within five years of the end of this project (to allow for the completion of my dissertation and subsequent academic presentations and publications based on my doctoral research). When the final dissertation is completed, a summary of the research findings and a link to my dissertation will be offered to you.

* * *

Please indicate your consent to the following, using a checkmark in front of the relevant option:

1. Permitting the researcher to enter your organization during scheduled events such as discussion support groups for Muslim converts and social gatherings to meet and speak with prospective participants and take notes about key points from conversations and observations.
   Yes  No

2. Permitting the researcher to take photographs of documents, objects, and spaces that participants may use to explain their experiences with embracing Islam. (Note: These photographs will not contain any information that may identify participants or your organization.)
   Yes  No

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Elysia Guzik, at 647-980-0532 or by email at elysia.guzik@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you have any further questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

I, ____________________________ [name of organization leader], am fully aware of the nature and extent of my administrative consent to allow the researcher to participate in programs and events offered by my organization and the possible risks that may result from it (e.g. some event attendees potentially feeling anxious or uncomfortable when speaking with the researcher about their conversion to Islam). I acknowledge that the researcher has explained the study and that I have been given an opportunity to have my questions about the study answered. I also acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent letter and form.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix D. Interview Guide 1 (Individual Participants)

1. Tell me a bit about yourself (age, education, profession, nationality, family, friends, interests, anything else that you would like to share).

2. Are you connected with any particular Muslim community or organization? (If so, could you describe your connection to that community? How often do you attend prayer, programs, and/or events in that community/organization?)

3. Before embracing Islam (or while in the process of considering to embrace Islam), were you connected with any other religious traditions?

4. How do you think your previous connection to this/these other religious tradition(s) impacted your conversion to Islam?

5. Could you tell me about your first encounter with Islam?
   a. What sparked your initial interest in Islam?
   b. Was there a particular person, event, book, or object that inspired you to learn more about Islam?
   c. How would you describe your emotional state, as you were initially learning about Islam?

6. How do you think these people/events/books/objects/emotions affected your decision to embrace or accept Islam?

Would you be willing to introduce me to a family member who has witnessed your conversion experience and lives in the GTA? (Your family member’s participation would be completely voluntary and confidential, and I would obtain his/her consent to participate in an interview, which would take approximately 30-60 minutes. The interview would focus on your family member’s religious background, and his/her perspectives on your conversion experience and related information practices. The purpose of conducting an interview with one of your family members is to gain a better understanding of how information plays a role in your experience of embracing Islam.)

If you can think of anyone else with conversion experiences to share, please send them a copy of the Recruitment Flyer. I have printed copies that you can take, and can email copies to you if that is more convenient.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to our next conversation.
Appendix E. Interview Guide 2 (Individual Participants)

[Begin interview with **timelining exercise:**

*Provide participant with a blank sheet of paper, pencil, and colour markers, and verbally provide the following prompts:*

“On this sheet of paper, draw a timeline, diagram, or other visual representation of your conversion experience. Indicate any critical events, turning points, transitional phases, and changes you encountered. Reflect on your spiritual journey so far: Think about your life before converting to/reverting to/embracing/accepting Islam, your present experiences, and your goals and expectations for the future, as they relate to what being Muslim means to you.”]

[Then proceed with the following questions:]

2. Thinking back to the situation you described in our last conversation (and/or in your drawing), can you think of any differences between how you search for and manage information about Islam, and how you might look for information in another everyday situation (unrelated to Islam)?

3. In what ways are your strategies in these two kinds of situations similar?

4. How have your beliefs and ideas about Islam changed over time?
   a. Can you think of any changes to how you search for information related to Islam (compared with how you searched for information when you initially encountered Islam)?
   b. What about changes to how you evaluate and share information related to Islam?

5. Do you follow a special decision-making process when selecting sources of information related to Islam?
   a. Do you have criteria for deciding which sources are relevant or appropriate, and which ones are not?
   b. How do you decide where to start looking for information about Islam/being Muslim?

6. Do you rely on other people or resources to find and evaluate information about Islam?
   a. Who do you talk to, or receive guidance from?
   b. Where do you go (i.e. online or geographic locations)?
   c. Are there specific items that you read, or media that you watch/refer to, for support? (Can you tell me about a few examples? What do you learn or discover from each of these resources?)

7. How do other Muslims (friends, family, acquaintances, imams, etc.) affect your decisions about where you go to learn more about Islam and how to represent yourself as a Muslim? (Do generational differences impact where you go to learn about Islam and how to represent yourself as a Muslim?)

8. How helpful are other people and resources for finding what you are looking for?
9. How do you think living in the GTA affects your conversion experience? (If you have lived in other places, how would you compare your experience of embracing Islam with those other places?)

10. Have you experienced any challenges or barriers to finding out more about Islam/being Muslim? (Do you find that your gender, age, language, and/or physical appearance factor into such challenges/barriers?)

11. Once you find information related to Islam and being Muslim, do you organize it? (Can you describe your organizational approach/system to me?)

12. How can you learn more about Islam/being Muslim? (Where are some places you might go/resources or people to whom you might refer to find out more about Islam/being Muslim?)

13. What would you still like to learn?

As I mentioned during our first meeting, if you can think of anyone else with conversion experiences to share, please send them a copy of the Recruitment Flyer. I have printed copies that you can take, and can email copies to you if that is more convenient.

Thank you for your time.
Appendix F. Interview Guide (Family Members)

1. Tell me a bit about yourself (age, education, profession, nationality, family, friends, interests, anything else that you would like to share).

2. Are you connected with any particular Muslim community or organization? (If so, could you describe your connection to that community? How often do you attend prayer, programs, and/or events in that community/organization? Are there specific items that you read, or media that you watch/refer to for finding and evaluating information related to your faith?)

3. Have you been connected with any other religious traditions?

4. How do you think your connection to Islam, or other religious tradition(s), affected your [family member]’s conversion to Islam?

5. Do you remember your [family member] discussing a particular person, event, book, or object that inspired him/her to learn more about Islam or his/her faith?

6. How would you describe your emotions when your [family member] expressed an interest in converting to Islam, or told you that he/she had embraced Islam?

7. How has your relationship to your [family member] changed since he/she converted to Islam?

8. How do you think your [family member]’s beliefs and ideas have changed over time?

9. What about changes to how he/she finds, evaluates and shares information related to his/her conversion to Islam?

10. Has your [family member] experienced any challenges or barriers to finding out more about Islam/being Muslim? (If so, what do you think factors into such challenges or barriers?)

11. How do generational differences between you and your [family member] impact where they go to learn about Islam and how to represent him/herself as a Muslim?

12. How does living in the GTA affect your [family member]’s conversion experience?

Thank you for your time.
Appendix G. Pilot Study Journal Questions

1. Describe a situation when you wanted to learn about Islam, or your faith more broadly.

2. What did you do to find answers to your questions about Islam/your faith?

3. Were there particular people, organizations, or other resources to whom/which you referred for help or guidance?
   a. How did you select them?
   b. What emotions did you experience after interacting with these resources?

4. Did you encounter any barriers to finding out more about Islam/your faith?

5. How did this situation affect your transition into/decision to embrace Islam?
Appendix H. Call for Participants

Are you a convert / revert to Islam? Currently experiencing the process of embracing Islam?

I would like to learn more about your experience with coming to know what it means to be Muslim. I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto and am studying how Muslim converts/reverts seek, evaluate, and share information that helps them develop new religious identities.

You are eligible to participate in this project if you are:

- 18 years of age or older
- Living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)
- Comfortable communicating in English
- Interested in sharing your experiences of learning about and embracing Islam.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me.

If you know someone else who might be interested in participating, please forward my contact information to them.

Contact: Elysia Guzik, PhD Student  
Email: elysia.guzik@mail.utoronto.ca  
Phone: 647-980-0532

Supervisor: Dr. Jenna Hartel  
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