

***E-mams* and Hybrid Muslims in ‘Convergent Spaces’:
Intersections of Online and Offline Religions for Canadian and American Muslims at
Reviving the Islamic Spirit Convention**

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on how Muslim Millennials in Canada and the United States navigate religious identities and research religious matters online. Their attendance and participation at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) convention – an annual conference in Toronto – illustrates their desire to meet in person even though they also engage in religious learning and activities online. Through qualitative interviews, I discover that these young Muslims find conducting Islamic research online to be convenient, however, their community needs are not fulfilled in the online Islamic world. Reviving the Islamic Spirit fulfills this need for in-person engagement by creating a suitable environment allowing Muslims to interact with religious authority figures from online spaces. Reviving the Islamic Spirit also allows Muslims to feel a sense of belonging and community in an offline space. All the participants in this study turned to the online Islamic world in search of religious authority. For many Muslim communities, religious authority plays a large role in their everyday lives. Unlike other Muslim minority communities, Sunni Muslims cannot agree on central religious authority. They do not have a central authority figure who they can rely on for inquiring about religious matters. These needs of religious authority and community bring together Muslims at Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention. I argue in this thesis that Reviving the Islamic Spirit creates a “convergent space.” In this space, characteristics are highlighted from the online and offline worlds without erasing any of the original elements. Reviving the Islamic Spirit provides space that brings the online religious world into the present offline world, and this in turn influences religious behaviours and lived religious experiences. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) What attracts young Muslims to RIS? 2) Does participation at RIS influence online and offline religious behaviours? 3) How are digital elements of online religion

(such as virtual religious practices and religious forum discussions) brought into offline spaces like RIS? and 4) What happens when the two physical and virtual religious spaces come together such as at the intersection at RIS? Participants were recruited from Reviving the Islamic Spirit where I was able to speak with attendees and set up a booth in the marketplace portion where people could approach me with interest about this study. The methodology included conducting 50 in-depth interviews and participant observation of attendees at RIS. The results indicate that Muslim Millennials were fascinated by “celebrity *imams*” such as Yasir Qadhi, Mufti Menk, Omar Suleiman, and Sohaib Webb. The results also verify that a ‘convergence space’ exists at Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention.

Keywords: Islam online; digital religion; cyberspace; online religion; offline religion; lived religion.

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LEGEND

CIE "Cyber-Islam Environments"

CMW Coalition of Muslim Women of -Kitchener-Waterloo

GTA Greater Toronto Area

IMO International Muslim Organization

IRDP The Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project

Q&A Question and Answer

RIS Reviving the Islamic Spirit

MSA Muslim Student Association

WRCPC Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council

CHAPTER ONE: HYBRID MUSLIMS IN 'CONVERGENT SPACES'

1.1 INTRODUCTION

I forgot how it is to feel normal like I belong, and Reviving the Islamic Spirit gave me that. (P34)

I wanted to sort of get back in to when you see a lot of Muslims you get like a nice feeling of community.... I know going back to the fact that I'm from a small city, but there isn't a humongous Muslim community here, so it's kind of interesting to go somewhere and everyone's going to be on the same page. You're not going to have to worry about 'oh it's prayer time, where are you going to pray?' Like there's always going to be accommodations without question. (P35)

Almost in the way that I described in the moment that you step out and you are right in the middle of the big, wide world again. It's a great reminder of what differentiates you in terms of your identity.... At the same time, there is a particular identity I have as a Muslim. That identity, living anywhere in the world in this day and age, it is often challenged in many different ways. The things that you feel inclined to do, the things that other people assume about you, there is many different things that you have to consider, and you feel that challenge specially if you are actively involved in the Muslim community. I think it [Reviving the Islamic Spirit] is a good reinforcer of the Muslim identity and that is what it has been for me. I come out of every year feeling extremely proud to be Muslim. (P15)

In December 2016, I attended Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) for the first time after hearing about it many times from my friends and seeing it promoted on university campuses and mosques in the Greater Toronto Area. I purchased my ticket online through the informative and easy to navigate event website. As I arrived at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre on the first day of the conference, I could already see crowds of Muslim families walking into the centre. As I went into the building and down multiple escalators, I was astonished at the number of people who were present in the building. The first few floors were dedicated to activities and smaller events like children's games, daycare rooms, Muslim matrimonial services, and so on. I arrived on the main floor where the speaker hall was located as well as a large gymnasium-like area where the

marketplace or bazaar portion of the convention was taking place. The area outside of the two main halls was dedicated to the event's main sponsors, including Islamic Relief and Zabiha Halal. This area was covered in sponsor posters, and Islamic Relief had a booth where people could make donations to their campaigns and programs like Sponsor an Orphan, Afghanistan Crisis Appeal, and Hunger Crisis Appeal. There were people everywhere! The picture below was taken by me in 2017 when I went the following year as well showing how many people were already there on the first day of RIS.



Figure 1: Photo taken at Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) in 2017 showcasing crowd.

Reviving the Islamic Spirit began in 2002 and has an average annual attendance of 20,000 people each year. I recognized many of the speakers at RIS from online spaces like YouTube. They were

the popular, social media-savvy *imams*. The same *imams* that had watched on YouTube and followed on Twitter (and had only online engagement with) were all present at this offline event in my hometown. Other featured speakers and performers included Muslim social media influencers and vloggers that were well-known among young Muslims online. This was a big event where the online and offline met. In 2022, RIS celebrated its 20th anniversary and went back to hosting it at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre in-person after holding the event virtually in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention is an important event for many reasons, but my primary reasons for studying it are its fusion of social media and in-person interaction, and its potential to create a space where young Muslims feel a sense of belonging and community. Social media has made it easy to gain access to many things that may be difficult to find or navigate in offline spaces – including information and experiences related to religion. Virtual socialization has become very common where people do not have to be concerned about face-to-face interactions. Anxieties surrounding social settings can be hidden. COVID-19 changed things for many people, including how religion was practiced and performed in physical spaces. Because limits were placed on in-person gatherings and lockdowns did not allow people to leave their homes, religion became further entrenched online, especially on social media. People were able to continue to participate in their (non)religious communities by participating and observing discussions and live streams on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other online platforms. Religious practices and beliefs were already part of the online world and many religious and nonreligious communities had found their place in the limitless cyberspace. However, there were still some communities and individuals who were hesitant or simply preferred to get their

religious needs met in physical places like mosques, religious conferences and events, and other offline gatherings. Due to restrictions and limitations during the COVID-19 pandemic, offline religious practices and events had to learn how to adapt and operate online – including the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention.

This thesis focuses on how Muslim Millennials in Canada and the United States navigate identities and research information about religion online. Their participation at Reviving the Islamic Spirit conference in Toronto plays a role in their search for religious authority and for religious community. The search for religious authority is an important consideration in thinking about its role in online sources and at events like RIS. Because Sunni Muslims cannot agree on central religious authority, they do not have a central authority figure who they can rely on for inquiring into religious matters. Within the Muslim community itself, however, other Muslim minority communities do in fact have central authority figures. For example, the Ismailis see the Agha Khan as their religious leader. The Ahmadiyyas refer to Mirza Masroor Ahmed as their guide. The Bohri community looks up to Mufaddal Saifuddin as their spiritual and religious guide. Sufi Muslims each have their own *tariqa* (spiritual path) that they are a part of. For some Shia Muslims, the Ayatollah is their source of religious authority. Apart from not having a central authority figure, Sunni Muslims are also very diverse – like much of the Shia community. Sunni Muslims are considered the majority among the other sects of Islam and they range in ethnicity, race, and religious beliefs and practices. Their lack of having one religious authoritative source means that Sunni Muslims are exposed to many different religious leaders who preach distinct and diverse beliefs, practices, and interpretations of the Muslim faith. Muslims who immigrate to Western countries such as Canada or the United States tend to bring their view of Islam from

their originating or homeland countries. Hence, specific ethnic-dominated mosques are born such as a Pakistani mosque, Somali mosque, Lebanese-Shia mosque, and many more depending on location and neighbourhoods. This not only adds to the multiple ways of practicing Islam based on culture and sect, but it also raises concerns for young Muslims who have yet to develop religious identities, who are parts of their cultural diaspora, and are immigrants in these countries. Where do they get their religious information from? Who do they turn to when they need clarification on Islamic matters? Is it the internet, an Imam, or family and friends? How do they distinguish between authentic and non-authentic Islamic information? These are some questions that provoked this research project.

This dissertation explores the online and offline religious behaviours of young Muslims in Canada and the United States of America. USA is included in this because Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention's attendees come from around the world. Many of the attendees that I met were Canadian and American citizens. This dissertation analyzes how virtual and analog spaces influence and shape the understanding and religious practice of these Muslims. RIS offers a space where both online and offline religions intersect. I call this a 'convergent space.' A 'convergent space' refers to a location that is in between online and offline bringing together elements from both worlds. A 'convergent space' highlights characteristics from online and offline without erasing any of the original elements. For example, I argue in this dissertation that RIS acts as a 'convergent space' because it provides space for the online religious world to be present offline and this in turn influences religious behaviours. The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What attracts young Muslims to RIS? What are their aims and objectives for attending RIS?
- 2) Does participation at RIS influence online and offline religious behaviours? If so, in which ways?
- 3) How are digital elements of online religion (such as virtual religious practices and religious forum discussions) brought into offline spaces like RIS?
- 4) What happens when the two physical and virtual religious spaces come together such as the intersection at RIS?

1.2 BACKGROUND

I met many Muslims when I left my neighbourhood in the Greater Toronto Area to begin my academic journey as an undergraduate student at York University in Toronto. In this small suburban town, Malton, I was surrounded by people of different cultures, but the majority of Muslims in this town were Sunni Muslims. At York University, I met Muslims that practiced Islam in many different ways than I did. Their Islamic practices and beliefs were outside of the norm for me. They were not “traditional” or “mainstream” Islamic practices and beliefs that I was familiar with. There were Muslim women who wore their hijabs in different styles which I had not seen before. This prompted my interest in how Muslims live as Muslims in Canada and the neighbouring United States, and how different their practices of Islam are. It got me wondering and asking myself, was there only one form of Islam? What kinds of Islams are out there? Attending Reviving the Islamic Spirit in Toronto for the first time only increased that curiosity of mine.

Every year York University's Muslim Student Association (MSA) would plan a trip to go to the Reviving the Islamic Spirit conference together as a group. I decided to go on my own so I could take my time observing what kind of place this was, what kind of people attend it, what people do there, and why it was so popular among Muslim students. At that time, I was also

intrigued by “celebrity *imams*.” I would watch YouTube videos of Muslim religious leaders who were popular among young people like me to find out what was so appealing about them. There were many times where I dived into the YouTube videos loop and watched these videos for hours at a time. I would watch people like Hamza Yusuf, Yasir Qadhi, and Zaid Shakir and their videos on topics on music, films, eating halal, and other topics that would interest me that dealt with challenges of being Muslim in Canada. I found out through other Muslim students at the university that these ‘celebrity *imams*’ would come to Toronto every year and that it was possible to see them in-person. This was at RIS. I also noticed that there was a fan culture around these *imams*. Whenever I spoke to other students about popular *imams*, it felt like we were discussing celebrities. I would get asked if I watched any of their new videos uploaded on YouTube, or a book that one of them released. It was exciting and I felt that it was a way for me to make Muslim friends. Talking about these *imams* with other Muslim friends reminded us of our Muslimness and a place of familiarity despite of how different our ways of practicing Islam were. Muslim Student Associations around the Greater Toronto Area would plan trips and attend Reviving the Islamic Spirit in groups. It would be like an annual trip. When I started my Master of Arts career at Carleton University, I saw posters around the university and on the MSA’s social media pages selling tickets to attend RIS. It reminded me of the first time I attended RIS in 2016. That is when I knew that I wanted to study this space and the interactions that take place there. What makes it so appealing? I knew for me it was because of seeing the *imams* in person, shopping at the bazaar, meeting new Muslims my age, and the fascination of it all.

Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) is an annual convention that takes place in Toronto since 2002. It initially started as a small gathering by Muslims students in Toronto. Following the events

of 9/11, they wanted to show how Islam is misrepresented and that these tragic events did not represent Islam or Muslims.¹ Each year, they held a conference and invited Islamic scholars to guest lecture, including Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir, who have been there almost every year since it first started. These students were part of Muslim Student Associations at different post-secondary institutions in the Greater Toronto Area such as York University and University of Toronto. Reviving the Islamic Spirit consists of a three-day convention, beginning on a Friday after congregational prayers held on-site and ending on the Sunday. It would always be Friday to Sunday, with Friday starting off the programme after the Friday congregational prayers at the Metro Convention Centre. RIS would also be held on Christmas weekend. Its programme includes many activities and events for attendees to take part in. Matrimonial services are offered, along with child-care activities, virtual reality experiences, Q&A sessions with invited speakers, performances by poets and musicians, and many more interactive activities. RIS offers a space where both Muslims and non-Muslims could get together and find a sense of belonging and community. At RIS, the religiosity of people does not matter. Attendees could identify as non-religious or only spiritual and still be offered a space of belonging. Everyone felt welcomed. Furthermore, another essential aspect of RIS that I uncovered was that it brought together online and offline religions. On one hand, it offered a place of discussion of religious matters and to perform religious acts and rituals. On the other, it brought the online world into the conference by inviting Islamic scholars who have large followings online – specifically on social media. Bridging of both online and offline worlds at RIS is also illustrated by the participants and their descriptions of their online activities that they discuss at RIS. They could “do” religion both online

¹ The history of RIS was relayed to me through informal conversations with RIS organizers and volunteers.

and offline. They could “be” Muslim in their own ways in any space. Their religiosity and understandings of Islam was influenced by information found on both online and offline spaces.

Although most of the participants in my research were Canadian, there were also a significant number of Americans. Hence, I decided to analyze the context and perspectives of American Muslims and their participation at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention, along with the Canadian participants. The following sections will introduce both Muslims in Canada, Muslims in the United States of America, and Islam online.

1.3 MUSLIMS IN CANADA

As mentioned above, most of the participants in this study resided in Canada. They either had Canadian citizenship or were permanent residents. Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada.² Canada has a long history of being home to Muslims. Muslims immigrated to Canada pre- and post-World War II from the Middle East, South Asia, Eastern Europe, East Africa, the Caribbean, and many other regions.³⁴ The first Canadian mosque was built in 1938 in Edmonton, Alberta. Since then, many mosques have been built across Canada. Reviving the Islamic Spirit takes place in Toronto, Ontario. Toronto or the Greater Toronto Area, also referred to as the GTA, is significant for this annual convention because it is the most populated metropolitan region in Ontario. It is the most culturally diverse and religiously plural region in Canada. Statistics Canada estimates Canada's immigrant population to be about 6,777,800 people in 2011, out of which

² Haddad, Y. Y., & Quadri, J. 2011. *Islam*. The Canadian Encyclopedia.

³ Abu-Laban, Qureshi, & Waugh. *The Muslim Community in North America*.

⁴ Selby, Barras & Beaman recount stories of Muslim settlement in *Beyond Accommodation: Everyday Narratives of Muslim Canadians* (2018).

the majority emigrated from Asia.⁵ The 2011 National Household Survey shows that between 2001 to 2011, 387,590 Muslims immigrated to Canada.⁶ In their 2019 report, Muslims represented 3.7% of Canada's population.⁷ Most of the participants in my research were first and second-generation Canadians. Some had migrated to Canada at a very young age prior to 9/11. While discussing being Muslim in Canada, many of them identified Islamophobia as an inevitable experience. Islamophobia was prevalent in Canadian society even before 9/11 and the interviewee's stories of Islamophobia will be covered in section 4.8.

1.3.1 MUSLIMS AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CANADA

Islamophobia occurs at both levels in Canada: individual and institutional. It has become an inevitable part of Canadian Muslims' lives. An example of individual Islamophobia and anti-Muslim violence in Canada is when in 2020 a caretaker of the International Muslim Organization (IMO) mosque was stabbed to death. An example of institutional Islamophobia is Bill 21. In 2019 Bill 21 was passed in Quebec. Bill 21 presented as "An Act respecting the laicity of the State" bans public service workers in Quebec from wearing religious symbols at their jobs. This law targets immigrant and racialized communities including Muslim women due the prohibition of the practice of veiling – Muslim women cannot work as civil servants while wearing a hijab or niqab. Although it prohibits other religious symbols like the turban and kippah, participants in my study discussed their dissatisfaction and its impact on Muslim women. This made it very personal for all participants. The Association for Canadian Studies conducted a survey in 2022 which identified

⁵ Statistics Canada, 2011. "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada".

⁶ Statistics Canada. 2011. "2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables".

⁷ Statistics Canada "Religion in Canada".

Muslim women as the primary religious minority group that is affected by Bill 21 the most. They also found that, “Muslim women as among the groups most severely impacted by stigmatization (53%), injustice (47.2%) and marginalization (decline of 78.4%).”⁸ Furthermore, in the 2015 Canadian federal elections, the Conservative Party proposed a controversial bill which aimed to “defend Canadian values.” This bill, Bill S-7, was called the “Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act.” It argued that “Canada’s openness and generosity does not extend to early and forced marriage, polygamy or other types of barbaric cultural practices.”⁹ The political debate over this bill was heated because critics argued that it was a veiled attack on Muslims based on stereotypes. Furthermore, in 2017 one of the most recent tragedies in the Muslim community in Canada took place at a Quebec mosque. This hate-motivated killing spree inside the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec took the lives of six people and injured 19. The convicted killer, Alexandre Bissonnette, killed them while they were inside the mosque praying. He was sentenced to two consecutive life sentences in 2019. This Quebec mosque was a prior target of vandalism and anti-Muslim acts, which later resulted in it becoming a crime scene where six Muslim worshippers were murdered.

Another incident in Canada to address anti-Muslim discrimination was passing of Motion 103 in the Canadian Parliament in 2017. This motion was introduced by Liberal MP Iqra Khalid and was passed after the Quebec mosque attack. It called for official recognition that Islamophobia exists in Canada, the collection of data and research on how Islamophobia impacts Canadians, and for the Government of Canada to condemn Islamophobia. Opponents to this

⁸ Taylor, 2022. “Law 21: Discourse, Perception & Impacts”.

⁹ Government of Canada, 2014.

motion argued that this motion provides Muslims with special treatment over other religious minorities because it was specifically about Muslims. They also reasoned that because they believed that it was a violation of freedom of speech, was similar to “blasphemy laws,” and the term “Islamophobia” itself was controversial. To the latter argument, Khalid described Islamophobia as “the irrational hate of Muslims that leads to discrimination,” hence its significance for opponents of Islamophobia¹⁰¹¹. Muslim associations are also not safe from Islamophobia in Canada. University of Toronto’s Institute of Islamic Studies conducted a study where they found that the Canadian government’s anti-terrorism financing and anti-radicalization policies create a structural bias against Muslim-led charities.¹² Besides having to deal with legislation that target Muslims in their everyday lives, Muslims simply cannot exist even in charitable intentions. This also impacts their everyday lives when Muslim-led charities are unfairly targeted by governmental agencies for being Muslim.

Although efforts are being made to address and fight Islamophobia in Canada, many incidents are still occurring. In 2020, Mohamed-Aslim Zafis was stabbed to death outside a mosque in Etobicoke, Ontario. His attacker was Guilherme Von Neutegem who had connections with far-right groups. A year later, the Afzaal family was killed in London, Ontario, for being Muslim; Nathaniel Veltman is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and associated terrorist charges. Earlier this year, in 2022, the Imam Mahdi (AS) Islamic Center in Thornhill, Ontario, was vandalized with hate-motivated graffiti, along with threatening worshippers and

¹⁰ CBC/Radio Canada. 2017, February 17.

¹¹ Al-Rawi, Kyong, & Amer, 2021. *Vocal, visible and vulnerable: female politicians at the intersection of Islamophobia, sexism and liberal multiculturalism*.

¹² Emon and Hasan. 2021. “Under Layered Suspicion”.

the mosque. Other incidents have occurred as this is not an extensive list of Islamophobic attacks, but they illustrate the prevalence of Islamophobia in Canada.

Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme (2018) identified the places in Canada where Islamophobia is more prevalent, including in Quebec. She suggests that anti-Islamophobia training and education should be brought to older residents who are not university educated at work, community, politics, media, and those who have more conservative values.¹³ Amin Malak (2008) had also identified how the realities of Canadian Muslims as being an integral part of Canadian multiculturalism is often met with Islamophobic incidents.¹⁴ He emphasizes the significance of Muslim Canadians interacting and socializing with other Canadian citizens to avoid isolation. Through this, Muslim Canadians can become a part of society without being “othered,” as they often are with anti-Muslim sentiments that give rise to Islamophobia and policies like Bill 60 in Quebec. Bill 60 called for a ban on religious clothing symbols in the workplaces – including hijabs and niqabs. In addition to this, Zine (2014) discussed controversies surrounding the negotiating of Canadian and Muslim identities. She explained that there is a “majority-Canadian culture” and Canadian Muslims who entered Canada as immigrants struggle to integrate into this culture. She concludes that contemporary Canadian identity differs from Canadian identity in the late 19th and 20th century, but there is more “tolerance” now because of the increase in religious plurality and cultural diversity.¹⁵ However, using the language of “tolerance” is problematic because it shows that there is often a social hierarchy or that there are power dynamics of minority versus

¹³ Page 106.

¹⁴ “Towards a Dialogical Discourse for Canadian Muslims”. 2008.

¹⁵ “Marketing Islamic Reform: Dissidence and Dissonance in a Canadian Context”. 2014.

majority cultures.¹⁶ In this case, the majority culture allows the minority culture to co-exist by tolerating it. These issues highlight the lived experiences of Muslims in Canada.

The Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council (WRCPC) and the Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener-Waterloo (CMW) organized a community consultation on Islamophobia in 2018. Some of the significant findings from this event included identifying root causes of Islamophobia, raise awareness around this topic in the community, and start a community dialogue and consultation. Participants who shared their lived experiences with Islamophobia identified the top main root causes of anti-Muslim hate as media bias and selective coverage, fear of “the other”/Muslims, and the lack of education around Islam and Muslims¹⁷. Islamophobia is something that Muslims in Canada have not been able to escape and is made worse by every anti-Muslim policy and misrepresentation seen in Canadian media. Hence, it is important for both me and my participants to raise this issue and highlight the ongoing need to combat Islamophobia as best as we can.

1.4 MUSLIMS IN THE USA

Canadians and Americans make up most of the attendees at RIS. Hence, it is important to mention a brief history of Muslims in the USA and to list some of the studies that have been done on Muslims in the United States of America. The American Religious Identification Survey 2001 estimated that there were over 527,000 Muslims in the US in 1990 which jumped to 1,100,000

¹⁶ Beaman, 2012.

¹⁷ Shafiq, Sarah. 2018. “Islamophobia in Waterloo region”, The Regional Municipality of Waterloo, <http://cmw-kw.org/pdf/islamophobia.pdf>.

Muslims by 2001.¹⁸ The PEW Research Center states that in 2007, there were 2.35 million Muslims who made up 0.8% of the American population.¹⁹ The increase in population is due to factors such as immigration and birth rates. The largest three ethnic groups of Muslims in America are South Asians, Arabs, and African Americans.²⁰

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (2014) has explored the issues of American Muslims negotiating their identities to integrate within the mainstream American society and how they seek to play the roles of American citizens while, at the same time, holding on to their religious identities.²¹ Struggling to belong culturally, nationally, and religiously is something that many Muslims are concerned about. The multiplicity and complexity of identities plays significant roles in how Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries live their lives. Their ways of doing religious practices and how they display their religiousness is influenced by the cultures that they are surrounded by.

When it comes to dealing with anti-Muslim actions and combatting Islamophobia, there are a few dedicated organizations whose aims are to fight anti-Muslim actions and policies. One of which is The Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) based at the Center for Race & Gender at the University of California, Berkeley. Its aim is to take a systemic and empirical approach in studying Islamophobia and its effect on American Muslims. Recently, it identified the top 10 Islamophobic moments of 2020 which included the persecution of Uighur Muslims in China, Modi's BJP in India, mass surveillance tied to Muslim Pro App, the Rohingya

¹⁸ Kosmin, B. A., Mayer, E., and Ariela Keysar. 2011. "American Religious Identification Survey".

¹⁹ Mohamed, Besheer. 2022. "Muslims Are a Growing Presence in U.S., but Still Face Negative Views from the Public."

²⁰ Serhal, 2014.

²¹ "What is an American Muslim?: Embracing Faith and Citizenship". 2014.

crisis in Bangladesh, and anti-Muslim bigotry in the 2020 US elections. This is important because Islamophobia impacts Muslims' everyday lives. Almost all the participants in this study spoke about their encounters with Islamophobia whether it was on personal or systemic levels. The effect on Muslim women in the US have been documented in studies like scholars like Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore. They argued that Muslim women were perceived as women who needed to be saved because the hijab was seen as a tool of oppression. This was not a new phenomenon, but the fear of Islam and Muslims dated back to the 1800s with each Arab and Muslim migration wave. Given that Muslim women are more prone to be victim of Islamophobia which will be discussed more in section 4.8 of this dissertation, Haddad, Smith, and Moore successfully illustrate how Muslim women are 'othered' by American society.

American Muslims – like Canadian Muslims – struggle to fit into the mainstream society because they are “othered” by Orientalist perspectives and misrepresentation on all types of media. Zareena Grewal (2014) discussed the central crisis of authority within mostly Sunni Muslim communities in North America.²² Through an anthropological perspective, she examined American Muslim youth who sought religious authority. She explored the question of whether Islam can be a religion in the United States without any compromise, assimilation, or dilution. Her work is essential to this thesis because participants shared similar struggles around the topic of religious authority. There is no central religious authority for Sunni Muslims, hence the internet has opened a limitless space where the hunt for such type of authority takes place for many Muslims. Furthermore, Karen Isaksen Leonard (2005) explored multiple identities of young Muslim Americans, as she claimed that they have more experience of socialization and education

²² Grewal. 2014. *Islam is a Foreign Country*.

in the United States than older immigrant Muslims.²³ She discussed the three main ethnic Muslim groups in America: African Americans, Arabs, and South Asians. She explained that because of multiple identities, there are many tensions among national, ethnic, and 'new' and 'old' forms of Muslim identity amongst young American Muslims. However, because newer generations tend to lean towards integration with the dominant, Western culture in the United States, these young Muslims have the power to cause fusion, and can cross over cultures, creating hybrid identities. Again, because multiple identities are complicated and very dynamic, it is important to examine how young Muslims are navigating their religious beliefs and practices in non-Muslim majority environments.

Participants who were American also brought up Islamophobia as a part of living as Muslims in America. Islamophobia existed in America, just like in Canada, before 9/11. Anti-Muslim policies and sentiments had always existed, as is clear in the way Muslims were always villainized in popular media. In 2009, PEW conducted a survey which showed that 58% of Americans believed that Muslims faced more discrimination in the country than any other religious group.²⁴ They conducted a similar study in 2021, and found the same results where Americans think that Muslims face more discrimination than other religion groups (see figure 1: 2009, 2011). These examples illustrate that it is widely known that Muslims experience life differently and have negative experiences in America just for being Muslim. It is no surprise then that the participants in my research felt inclined to discuss this matter as it was a lived reality for them.

²³ 2005. "Introduction: Young American Muslim Identities"

²⁴ "Muslims Widely Seen as Facing Discrimination." 2020.

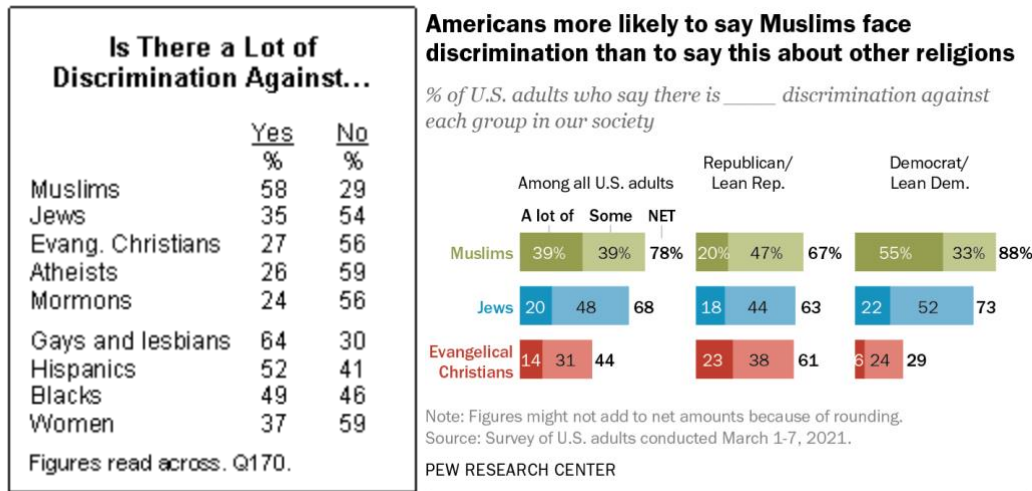


Figure 2: PEW Research Center's findings on discrimination against Muslims in the United States in 2009 and 2011.

1.5 ISLAM ONLINE

The internet has created an online world where people engage in activities related to religion. This online world illustrates the shifting of location for both religious and non-religious practices, experiences, and communities – from the real world to the virtual. Islam on the Internet has been studied since the mid 1990s, notably by Gary R. Bunt. He is a pioneer in the study of Islam in cyberspace. He has examined an exhaustive list of topics in relation to Islam such as e-jihad, dating and prayer applications, Islamic websites, surveillance, CD recordings, forums, question and answer archives, message boards, religious authority, and much more. Over the years, the study of Islam online has become an interdisciplinary field with scholars in fields such as sociology, communications, religious studies, anthropology, political science, and others, conducting research. Building on this, Robert Rozehnal's *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital*

Media in the Internet Age (2022),²⁵ covers topics such as: authority and authenticity, community and identity, piety and performance, and visual and cultural representations. Prior to this, I was also involved in the study of Canadian Muslims online that was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This project, "New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Canadian Muslims Online", was led by Principal Investigator Roxanne Marcotte, and the research team is currently putting together a volume of the findings. The aim of this research project was to examine how Muslims across Canada use the internet and how the internet influences their everyday lives.²⁶ The study's focus was on four main areas: identity, community, diversity, and authority. Franz Volker Greifenhagen who was a co-investigator on this project outlines how the project generated its data:

- (1) An on-line questionnaire, available on the project website, which contains demographic and open-ended questions in the four research areas.
- (2) One-on-one semi-structured interviews with Muslim participants, recruited online and through established community networks. The goal is to capture a cross-section of the overall Muslim population in Canada (English and French) but with an emphasis on those from ages 18–35, on women, and on religious leaders.
- (3) Analysis of specific websites and other digital media identified by survey respondents and interviewees as ones which they often use.²⁷

These studies and projects show the emergence of Islam online as a research field. Apart from these two major research projects on Muslims online, there are many other scholars worldwide who study Muslims online. Claudia Carvalho (2014) studied Spanish Muslim women online on Facebook, Mattias Ekman (2015) examined online Islamophobia, Cory Funk's (2017) dissertation was on Muslim hashtags on Twitter, and Sabrina Joseph (2014) explored online *fatawa* (legal

²⁵ I was honored to be a part of this volume and to contribute a chapter on perspectives of religious authority based on my doctoral research while I was writing this thesis.

²⁶ For more info, visit: <https://musulmanscanadiensonline.uqam.ca/en/>

²⁷ Greifenhagen, 2015, 208.

Islamic rulings). In whichever way Islam is appearing online, scholars are taking note and studying its roles and impacts on societies and on individuals' daily lives. My research contributes to this literature by examining the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention in both online and offline Islamic spaces. I illustrate how intersections of both the online and offline worlds possibly meet in one space – this space is RIS, and it is done through its attendees and the presence of recognized religious authority figures.

1.6 ORGANIZATION OF THESIS CHAPTERS

Chapter Two outlines the main scholarship related to this dissertation. It reviews works of scholars on religion and media; the mediatization of religion, religious identity, authority, communities online; and Islam in Cyberspace.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the theoretical framework and methodologies used for this study. It explains the theoretical framework used, research design and why specific methodologies were used. It also addresses some of the issues that I faced as an academic who is also an insider to the Muslim community and how that may have acted as a limitation to the study. The theoretical framework that was used in this thesis is Lived Religion. Participant observation and qualitative interviews were conducted for this research.

The findings from this study are then introduced in Chapter Four. This chapter examines the findings from this study. It reveals the factors that influence the participants' religious behaviours in online and offline spaces. The results indicate that RIS acts as a space where both online and offline worlds meet. It shows the dilemmas and navigation that young Muslims must

go through in their everyday lives to practice Islam in their own ways. This includes searching for religious matters online and trying to figure out what and who is authentic and unauthentic.

I then turn to religious authority and examine who 'celebrity *imams*' are in Chapter Five. It highlights four main religious leaders who were identified by participants as 'celebrity *imams*.' These are: Yasir Qadhi, Omar Suleiman, Mufti Menk, and Suhaib Webb.

Finally, Chapter Six concludes the study by reviewing the significance of the need to do this research. It also reviews the methodology and theoretical framework used in this study which arrived at certain results.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how media impacts people's everyday lives and religiosity, we need to examine how religious identities and communities exist on the internet, along with their influence on people. The literature on this topic offers an important framework for studying how young Muslims navigate the intersections of online and offline religions. To understand the influences of online religion on offline religious behaviours, it is significant to study how concepts of online and offline religions are presented in scholarly work. I focus on religion in online and offline spaces as a global phenomenon since cyberspace transcends geographical boundaries. Therefore, it creates a transnational/international community and space online. Because of this, performing and participating in religion online means many different things. Many religious communities use the internet in different ways that work for them, such as creating a sense of community, and offering services and resources that they cannot offer in-person. The significance of religion online is seen in religious and non-religious communities everywhere. This has resulted in a lot of scholarly work done on religion and the internet. This field is constantly evolving, and new studies emerge because the online world keeps changing. This chapter will review research projects done in this field that exemplify the importance of understanding religion online.

In addition, Lived Religion is essential in this study because it too offers an important framework. Because religion has often been conceptualized in terms of institutionally linked practices, anything outside of that is often ignored. However, some Sociologists and Anthropologists have noticed this and presented research that examines religion that occurs outside of institutions. This research is discussed here to show how Lived Religion emerged as a

subfield in Sociology and its significance for studying religious people who sometimes fall outside of the norm. It is useful for showing how people practice religion and how they interpret religious and nonreligious actions in their everyday lives. Many factors such as globalization, modernity, and immigration contribute to constructions of religious identities among different communities and shapes the diverse understandings of religion. This is relevant because many participants in this study had their own ways of being Muslim and understood Islam in their own personal ways. Furthermore, discussing Muslims in Canada and the United States is impossible without the mention of Islamophobia. One of the significant findings from my research includes the emphasis on encountering Islamophobia. Many participants shared that they encountered Islamophobia in their everyday lives in unexpected places such as work and being out with friends at shopping malls. Islamophobia is something that Muslims cannot avoid, especially in non-Muslim majority countries such as Canada and the United States. Of course, Islamophobia is very prevalent in Europe, Africa, Australia, as well as Muslim-majority countries, but Canada and the US are the focus of my research.

After presenting the relevant literature, this chapter situates this present study in the literature to demonstrate its significance and contribution to the fields of religion and media, sociology, and religious studies. It positions the arguments and research questions of this study to fill in the research gaps that exist. The literature is discussed in the following order:

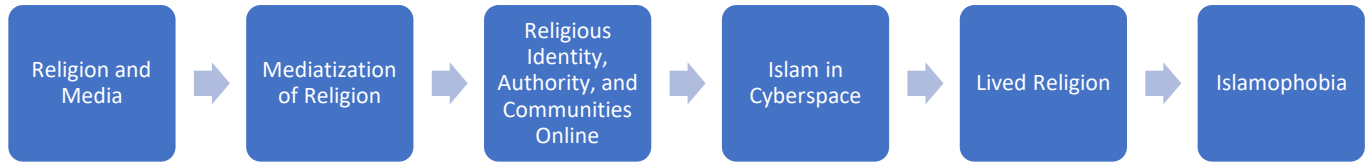


Figure 3: Organization of literature review chapter.

2.1 RELIGION AND MEDIA

To understand the significance of religion and media, it is best to examine the pioneers of this field first, then explore how vast and diverse studies in religion and media have become. Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby (1997) argued that early Sociologists of religion ignored how media fit into the modernization or post-modernization of society which in result affected religious changes and trends.²⁸ They insisted that Sociologists of religion did not theorize how media changed cultures and religion. However, the field of Media and Religion has developed over the years and much research has been done on the impacts of media on religion and culture. According to Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövheim (2017), we are currently in the “fourth-wave” of research on religion and the internet. They assert that this wave of researchers focuses on how religious actors negotiate the relationships between online and offline lives via specific theoretical discussions and methodological approaches. Bunt (2018, 2009), Campbell (2017,

²⁸ Page 4.

2015, 2013, 2010), Lorne L. Dawson (2004), and Stewart M. Hoover (1997, 2016, 2001) have worked on locating religion on the internet and studied how individuals situate themselves in online worlds with the use of religion. Knut Lundby (2013) then suggests that Religious Studies can learn from Media Studies by understanding media content and media communication in society and the other way around, where Media Studies can learn from Religious Studies since “religions are to a large extent shaped by their dominant means of communication.” Scholars Campbell and Lövheim (2017) further suggest that researchers should resist the temptation to get lost in the “newness” of digital phenomena. Although this can be true, the ever-changing online world allows us to find religion and study how it is being done and performed which is not the same as in offline spaces.

Campbell (2013) explains that the term “digital religion” does not simply refer to religion online, but it also relates to how digital media and spaces shape religious practices and the other way around (1). Campbell suggests that “digital religion” describes the technological space that have made online and offline spaces integrated and blended.²⁹ She also developed a theoretical framework for the shaping of technology (2010) in which religious traditions are examined to deduce how they use technology, and how they help shape technology (Social Shaping of Technology -SST) (Lundby 2013).³⁰ This theory prioritizes ways in which technology is shaped by its designers and users and has four main perspectives of analysis: 1) specific history and traditions of the religious communities under study; 2) core beliefs and patterns of the religious communities; 3) negotiation process and new media; and, 4) framing and the discourse on new

²⁹ Page 4.

³⁰ Page 232.

media within a specific religious community.³¹ Some scholars have critiqued this theory. Kühle and Langholm (2021) examine how the Danish community was forced to shift religion from an offline space to an online space due to COVID-19 restrictions. They collected quantitative and qualitative data from three research projects to study how the Danish National Church and Muslim communities used media during the pandemic. Campbell's RSST (Religious-Social Shaping Approach to Technology) is used as a theoretical framework and a critique of this theory is presented. They find that religious communities were highly in favor of cooperating with authorities to maintain safety and community, and organizational structures and positions of religious communities were impacted by the lockdown measures, yet RSST fails to recognize the conflict-producing results of the changing religious landscape in online spaces – especially around differences between minority and majority religions. This article's focus on how mediatization of religion can cause conflict is very significant because it sheds light on something that is underlooked. Many scholars who research the media of religion do not discuss what conflicts may arise in such situations and spaces. This includes legal, political, and economic conflicts.

Understanding "digital religion" is important for examining and understanding religion that is found in online spaces. The online world is constantly evolving, so keeping up with "digital religion" is significant in studying religion. Lövheim and Linderman (2005) found the following for religion on the internet, based on their empirical findings from research in 1998: 1) the internet allows finding and spreading information on diverse practices and beliefs; 2) interactivity allows people from different backgrounds to connect; and, 3) interdependence on networks across time

³¹ Page 233.

and space allows for information on different religious beliefs and practices.³² This information is transferred through online networks and online platforms like YouTube. In Burgess and Green's (2009) analysis of YouTube, they look at the rise and significance of the changing digital media environment which has allowed YouTube to emerge in the mid-2000s as a dominant media platform. The authors identify YouTube as a "high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network."³³ Online platforms like YouTube allow religion to be present online and for it to spread throughout the internet. Without YouTube, we may not see popular religious figures online or be able to examine how religious practices take place on the internet. This is true for media events which have mixed with religious practices such as Reviving the Islamic Spirit. Hepp and Krotz's (2010) analysis of different types of media events is valuable for their examination of the influence media has on certain parts of society. They describe three "scripts" of media events: 1) "contest" where events would take place under agreed rules in a place like an arena or stadium organized around legal authority; 2) "conquest" which is usually a single day event like the televised moon landing that falls under charismatic authority; and 3) "coronation," which is a recurrent media event that takes place on traditions in public spaces and confirms to traditional authority. The authors analyse the Catholic World Youth Day, which is an example of how individualization and mediatization of religion works. According to their analysis, Catholic World Youth Day shows how hybrid media events bring together media and religion. However, an analysis of how these types of events shape religious practices and perspectives of religious authority and authenticity is needed to fully understand their impact on society.

³² Page 127.

³³ Page 5.

The Church ov MOOism – an online religious group – is an interesting case study to determine the diversity of religions that are found in online spaces. The internet allows people to be a part of any (non)religious community. It makes space for alternative religions like the Church ov MOOism. Dawson and Hennebry (2004) discuss this group, which was established in the early 1990s by a group of students in Ottawa who gained a following from people with training and background in math, computer science, and other skilled careers.³⁴ They had religious documents that were fabricated and taken from other religious institutions in order to combine humour and religion in the texts. Although this may have been a joke to the creators of this church, it illustrates that people were interested in being a part of a religion which was exclusively online and different from common religions. Similarly, Gregory P. Grieve's (2015) research on digital Buddhism, where he used Second Life as an ethnographic field, led to the finding that "Buddhist philosophical concepts, as well as the practice of the anthropology of Buddhism, indicate a middle path between those skeptical of virtual worlds as valid social spaces, and those who argue for their ontological distinction".³⁵ Therefore, the internet can open up new spaces where religious traditions appear to create new forms of practices and beliefs, whether they are only virtual or both online and offline in hybrid forms. Although Second Life is mostly outdated in the social media age, we can learn from it how people seek a middle ground between religious authority based on which space they are based in. But what about hybridity, and how do people who look for the in-between and are skeptical of religious authority find their space?

³⁴ Page 169.

³⁵ Page 34.

Religion on the internet also includes memes. Memes refer to images, videos, or text that are spread on the internet and imitate a person or idea. Knobel and Lanksher (2007) define a meme as a “rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language, move, or some other unit of cultural stuff”.³⁶ Memes used by Mormons and a religious institution like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) were examined by Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller in “Religious Memetics: Institutional Authority in Digital/Lived Religion” (2015). Their specific memes were produced using quotes from the semi-annual General Conference and were posted on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter with the conference hashtag. They were also “counter-memed” by anti-memes who post memes that are secular and usually poke fun at religious memes which the authors describe as “atheistic humour”.³⁷ Burroughs and Feller claim that the use of memes by the Church and Mormons are not only to increase the visibility of the Church on online platforms, but it is also a form of religious practice that is used to create social networks and provides for a range of interpretations with each meme.³⁸ They also argue that this illustrates a form of authoritative media production and negotiation of religious values by Mormon churches. Similarly, memes used by individuals can also be religious and challenge religious authority through humour. Many religious leaders have adapted the use of memes to connect with their audience and an example of this is Mufti Menk – who will be discussed later as a part the research findings on religious authority. The trend of using memes on social media to connect with an online audience is part of religion

³⁶ Page 360.

³⁷ Page 372.

³⁸ Page 373.

online. Memes are an expression of religious identity that can be examined to understand how media influences religious practices both in online and offline spaces.

2.2 MEDIATIZATION OF RELIGION

Most scholars who write on media and religion often discuss its bi-directional influence. In this understanding, both media and religion are considered actors of social change and are infused with other factors like globalization to make religion prevalent. According to Daya Kishan Thussu (2007), “globalization” plays a significant role in how information is transferred using media. He defines ‘globalization’ as something that is “quantitatively and qualitatively reshaping international movements of people”.³⁹ He argues that the rise in the use of the internet reflects on technological changes that create transnational traffic. Because globalization refers to transnational communities, these communities are easily present online and contribute to the transfer of religious data from one corner of the world to another. This relates to Gordon Lynch (2012), who discusses how the mediation of sacred forms is presented. In this framework, the emphasis is on the sacred rather than on religion alone.⁴⁰ For example, the mediatization of the sacred represents how public media represents and receives concepts of the sacred and evil. Lynch illustrates this through empirical evidence such as looking at coverage on conflict in the Middle East and child suffering on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and how they are presented as religious issues by the media.⁴¹

³⁹ Page 2.

⁴⁰ Lundby, 2013.

⁴¹ Page 232.

Hoover (2016) explains that there are two fundamental concepts that help to understand religion and its role in politics and society: media and mediation of religion, religious symbols, and religious experience in the resurgence of religion, and the question of religious authority.⁴² Similarly, Stig Hjarvard's (2013) theory of mediatization of religion has proved to be a critical framework in understanding how media and religion work together, although it has been criticized by some scholars. This theory teaches how media presents religion, although Hjarvard's work is more focused on popular media like films and television, as opposed to social media which exists online. He argues that media acts as an independent agent of religious change. Hjarvard claims that social institutions depend on media and communicate through media to others and to society-at-large.

Hjarvard (2016) argues that the "visibility of religion is in part a reflection of a general mediatization of religion through which religious beliefs, agency, and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media".⁴³ According to him, this illustrates the significant role of religious authority in media spaces. Mediatization of religion offers opportunity for "a general re-sacralization of society".⁴⁴ His data comes from research done in the Nordic countries. The idea of "banal religion" is also very important in understanding the changing media structures that impact religious authority. "Banal religion" is where religion is less noticeable but very present in modern society with the focus on religious imaginations and practices specifically in popular media.⁴⁵ Tomas Axelsson (2015) questions this idea of banal religion, explaining that its

⁴² Page 2.

⁴³ Page 8.

⁴⁴ Page 15.

⁴⁵ Page 13.

claims do not stand in the context of individualized meaning-making processes and is therefore problematic for assuming moral significance in fictional emotions and narratives. He suggests that instead, vernacular meaning-making can be found. Here, this meaning-making happens regularly in everyday life and is not exclusive to mediatization. Axelson's main critique is that emotionally charged interpretations are under-looked by labels like 'banal religion' and those labels ignore the creative ways that meaning making is conducted. It is not restricted to the banal concept that only emphasizes moral orientation on a microlevel. He demonstrates this through data that was compiled and completed by students studying different fields, and through interviews that explore how people perceive fictional narratives.⁴⁶

Bringing this into the Muslim world, Setianto's (2015) research focuses on how religion is mediatized by Indonesian Muslim diasporas in the United States. Setiano studies the Indonesian Muslim Society in America (IMSA) and their use of the media to demonstrate specific mediatization. For example, this community uses specific radio stations and TV channels to reach religious authority and sources that they cannot access in-person. An interesting finding is that this community uses tele-*halaqa*, which is a long-distance call that people can join in for discussions. The authors argue that this offers an alternative reality than the one offered by the mediatization of religion theory where mediatization makes way for secularization. In fact, this Muslim community shows that that mediatization is allowing religious practices and sources to shift online so a wider audience can access them rather than become secular. This study emphasizes the roles of diasporic communities in mediatization. Participant observation and

⁴⁶ Page 151.

qualitative interviews are the research methods used in this study. However, it fails to point out how globalization has impacted the religious uses of media in the Indonesian Muslim diaspora.

Again, the emphasis on religion online is significant because it can be co-dependent on other factors like media. Stout (2012) points out two main things about the relationship between religion and media: 1) organized religion is found in multiple forms of media; and, 2) many elements of religion like ritual and belief are experienced through popular media. He argues that religion can be used to analyze media according to rituals, beliefs, community, and dimension.⁴⁷ He also discusses secularization and understands it as “the idea that religious commitment weakens through exposure to the media” and acknowledges that it is a controversial concept.⁴⁸ These are important to consider because religious and nonreligious practices stemming from media demonstrate actual mediatization. They also influence people to understand and access religious practices and beliefs online. Mediatization especially impacts young people who often search for religious communities online.

2.3 RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, AUTHORITY, AND COMMUNITIES ONLINE

Young people have been the focus of many studies on the influence of social media. Koen Leur's (2015) research is on how Moroccan-Dutch young people who are born in the Netherlands construct their identities in online spaces and navigate issues of multiculturalism, anti-immigration sentiments, and Islamophobia in Europe. Similarly, Lövheim (2004) studied how young adults in Sweden negotiated and constructed their identities in online spaces. The results

⁴⁷ Page 2.

⁴⁸ Page 10.

indicated that when these young adults went online to discuss religion with others, their experiences were not only different from each other's, but everyone had the opportunity to present and explore their own religious identity. Unlike in offline settings, online they could explore what belonged to religion and what was not an element of religion.⁴⁹ Jasjit Singh (2014) discusses the role of the internet in influencing religious identities of young British Sikhs. His methodology includes qualitative interviews, focus groups, and online surveys to see how the internet is used by this demographic. He argues that online environments do not impact traditional religious sources as many scholars have claimed. Instead, these environments contribute to the religious identities of young British Sikhs, foster a sense of community, and give them access to spaces to discuss religious matters. Singh's findings suggest that they use the internet for: 1) discussing taboo subjects; 2) exploring diverse Sikh practices; 3) purchasing Sikh resources like books and clothing; and, 4) accessing a variety of resources, among other uses. These are notable studies; however, they fail to demonstrate how being online changes their perspectives of offline religion, authority, and community. This present study identifies and illustrates this perspective.

In relation to online religious authority, Campbell explores the issue of religious authority online and aims to answer who holds religious power and influence in the online world. She also investigates what constitutes religious authority and by whom, by looking at sources, processes, and structures online. In *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (2020), Campbell specifically examines whether religious authority in digital media is aided by recognized religious institutions or by leaders that are employed by these institutions. The latter is referring

⁴⁹ Page 69.

to religious workers and influencers who use their technological skills for religious institutions and furthering their agendas in online spaces. She focuses on “a new class of Christian workers” that she refers to as religious digital creatives (RDCs). For example, these can be communication or press officers for a specific church or leader. Campbell argues that although RDCs play an important role in importing religious education, resources, and leadership online, they are also faced with difficulties within their own Christian communities because of traditional religious authorities that adhere to offline practices. Her emphasis in this book is on RDCs who influence religious institutions through their online work.

Furthermore, on the same topic that relates to offline authority, Hoover (2016) looked at the concept of authority in relation to Max Weber’s ideas of the nature of authority and the categories of authority: legal (established laws and political traditions); traditional (embedded in shared history and received tradition – cultural practices); and charismatic (attractiveness to audience). Hoover explains that Weber argues that for authority to be legitimate, it “must be perceived to be plausible, valid, and (to an extent) authentic.”⁵⁰ Additionally, Hoover and Coats’ (2011) research aimed to challenge claims that were present in the media such as ‘God-centred masculinity’ and the center of “virtue” in a conservative society. The results of this research found that white Evangelical men really did see the media as a “source of a variety of social ills” that led to a “crisis of masculinity”.⁵¹ An example of this is one of the Christian participants described the media as promoting homosexuality via the TV show *Will and Grace*, which the participant was

⁵⁰ Page 20.

⁵¹ Page 866.

opposed to because they believed homosexuality was a central “sin.” These studies prompt question on how religious authority is perceived through media.

For Muslims, Hamdani (2020) points out that the digital world allows Muslims to pick which type of religious authority fits their preferences and spiritual needs aka “*fatwa shopping*.” He illustrates that Indonesian Muslims can move from an authoritarian offline religious authority to a more democratic online religious authority where everyone can find religious communities that fit their needs. According to Hamdani, traditional media consists of oral and print media while new authority is internet-based.⁵² He uses Somad as an example of someone who comes from a traditional religious authority background and adapts to the new online authority by appearing and gaining a large audience on social media platforms. He argues that in the Indonesian public space, newcomers with religious authority have emerged in social media although they lack deep knowledge of Islamic sciences and for the most part are younger than traditional scholars. Traditional scholars tend to have Islamic knowledge from religious institutions that are recognized by the public as credible.⁵³ For example, Hamdan argues that Somad “has taken advantage in manipulating the Muslim public by imposing Islamic interpretations based on his own understanding.”⁵⁴ Preachers like Somad have used the online world to influence Indonesian Muslims and influence specific interpretations of Islam in public. This present study examines leaders in the Muslim community who operate similarly to Somad in the public eye and on social media. The Muslim leaders in this study show the significance of authority for young Sunni Muslims who otherwise cannot find a similar type of leadership

⁵² Page 260.

⁵³ Page 269.

⁵⁴ Page 270.

elsewhere, so they must search online. Similar to Hamdani, Pauha (2022) examined the relationship between young Muslims and traditional religious authority. Pauha's case study consisted of a young Shia Muslim person who adopted to two positions to understanding Islam. One of these positions was of independent religious research and the other position was accepting that religious practices had routine and structure. This person's negotiation of understanding religion illustrates the struggle that many Muslims have – especially when they are during developing their religious identities and make sense of religious authority. This idea will be discussed in the research findings chapter.

Offline and online religious practices are also influenced by religious authority figures. In "Cultivating Online and Offline Pathways to Enlightenment: Religious Authority and Strategic Arbitration in Wired Buddhist Organization," (2011) the authors examine Buddhist clergy communication in relation to an internationalist perspective of religious organizations.⁵⁵ The research was done in Singapore and in-depth interviews with Buddhist leaders were conducted. They describe "strategic arbitration" which refers to how priests have expanded their communication to multimodal representations and communicative influence to maintain their authority. This includes branding practices, face-to-face mentoring, and corporeal rituals that are brought online by managing and reconstructing knowledge norms from online sources.⁵⁶ The authors argue that previous studies have ignored how dynamic authority has been adapted online by meshing both traditional practices and new roles of authority. The focus here is on Buddhist clergy and their study deals with some of the issues that arise with epistemic authority.

⁵⁵ Cheong, Pauline Hope, Shirlena Huang, and Jessie P. Poon. 2011.

⁵⁶ Page 1164.

Their results indicate that offline-online religious practices are influenced by priests; temple spaces and priests play an important role as a major medium of knowledge; and those priests are familiar with multimedia platforms.⁵⁷

Religious authority also presents itself online in Christian churches. Rajan and Kundu (2019) focus on Christian churches in India and digital tourism – specifically the Assemblies of God Fellowship (AGF). This church is in Gujarat, India, and is operated by young Indians who bring their church into the online world. It is one of the most virtually active churches in Ahmedabad. The authors found that the church attempts to fulfil audience desire by taking a “modernised and corporate approach to Pentecostalism.”⁵⁸ They also found that the church actively uses social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogger accounts, each of which contribute to meaning, identity, authority, and tourism for the church and its members – an example of religious social shaping through technology.⁵⁹ The authors indicate the individualization of religion through access, self-regulated consumption and contribution, personalized content, and the flexibility of approaching the church and religiosity.⁶⁰ Finally, the authors touch upon “religious tourism” which refers to visiting places to fulfil their religious beliefs, including religious centres.^{61,62} Examples of this include anything religious on the internet such as virtual pilgrimages and religious marketing. The change in religious worship and practices is important to comprehend the influence of media. While the previous two studies do a stellar job of illustrating

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Page 57.

⁵⁹ Campbell, 2010.

⁶⁰ Page 60.

⁶¹ Garcia et al, 2018.

⁶² Page 62.

this, they miss the opportunity to emphasize lived religion for these communities who have altered religious practices and religious worldviews with or without religious authority.

Questions and Answers (Q&A) websites also play a significant role in understanding religious authority online. Ruth Tsuria (2010) studies Jewish religious websites that offer Q&A to find out how sexual practices are negotiated online in religious communities. She examined the content on websites that dealt with issues of masturbation and the physical interaction of opposite sexes. She argues that because these non-normative issues are discussed online, rabbis and users have taken a strict approach to these matters. Therefore, in this case, sexuality in online religious discourse promotes traditional and/or fundamental practices. This study is a significant example of how online religious communities can influence offline religious practices. In this study, the focus was on sexual norms and counters the argument that virtual religious communities are almost always democratic. The conservative Islamic parallel with this study is examining Q&A websites like IslamQA.info or IslamCity.org.⁶³ These websites work in a similar manner as the Orthodox Jewish websites that Tsuria studied, and both faiths employ a more traditional approach to sexuality.

Meanwhile in the Islamic online world, the introduction of online *fatawa* websites was deemed to be problematic at first. In Al-Kandari and Dashti's "Fatwa and the Internet: A Study of the Influence of Muslim Religious Scholars on the Internet Diffusion in Saudi Arabia," (2015) the focus is on how the internet influenced Muslim religious scholars in the country. By using the diffusion of innovations theory (how and why innovations spread), the authors examine *fatawa* that Saudi scholars announced regarding the Internet since 2000. The Saudi clerics base their

⁶³ Bunt 2018.

fatawa on Sharia law which according to them is based off the Quran, sunnah and *ijtihad*.⁶⁴ Their results indicate that since 2000 to 2012, 34 *fatwa* were declared in which most approved use of the internet because it relates to the learning of Islam.⁶⁵ The disapproving and conditional *fatwa* pointed out that the internet encouraged features that Islam forbids such as music, co-ed interaction, and would ultimately bring evil and immorality to society.⁶⁶ Al-Kandari and Dashti argue that religious scholars need to be more open-minded regarding technological changes like the internet – as their neighbouring countries, who have similar religious and cultural traditions, have done – although this will be unlikely because of Saudi's vision for moral and ethical institutions of Islam.⁶⁷ This study emphasizes how religious authority works in relation to the online world and it is useful in framing authority and authenticity discussions.

To conclude about religious identity, authority, and religious communities online, Premazzi and Ricucci (2015) identify religious differences in relation to practice, references, and belonging between first- and second-generation immigrants in Europe. Focusing on the use of Facebook by young Muslims and the impact of that on generational relations, the authors argue that the internet offers a safe space for second-generation immigrants to discuss social problems including religious obligations and ethical concerns. Their main research focused on how young Muslims living in Italy use Facebook for developing, managing, and discussing their religious belonging and what the effects of this process were on the relationship between first and second generations.⁶⁸ Keeping this in mind – that young people go online to develop meanings of

⁶⁴ Page 129.

⁶⁵ Page 134.

⁶⁶ Page 139.

⁶⁷ Page 142.

⁶⁸ Premazzi and Ricucci, 2015, 150.

religious identity, authority, and to find religious communities – we can examine how Islam presents itself on the internet.

2.4 ISLAM IN CYBERSPACE

In the recent years, research on Muslims and in the Internet has drastically increased and is being done worldwide. For example, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2011) examine the use of the internet for religious purposes in the Middle East, while Nisa (2018) studied religious apps for Indonesian youth, and Rozehnal (2018) focused on online American Sufism communities. According to Bunt (2009) “cyber-Islamic environments” refers to anything that has to do with Muslims on the internet. He discusses the complex issues of Islamic authority in cyberspace that illustrates modes of hierarchy and power in addition to personal interactions with religious authority online. He argues that the internet facilitates and reconfigures Muslim discourse and practices, specifically on digital platforms which results in the digitization of the sacred. These platforms offer Quran recitations, translations, and interpretations, along with ritual performances and polemics. Bunt (2018) also discusses the perception of the concept of jihad on the internet. He explains that it is commonly associated with “ultraviolent terrorism and anti-western politics,” usually translated as “holy war.”⁶⁹ However, he emphasizes that jihad comes in two forms, the lesser jihad which is commonly translated in the West as being violent, and the greater jihad which is the spiritual and religious striving.

Mohammed El-Nawawy and Samar Khamis (2011) analysed Islamic discourse online by looking at websites such as islamonline.net, islamway.com, and amrkhaled.net. They also

⁶⁹ Page 99.

explored issues that arose within Muslim communities such as Sunni versus Shia discourses about certain topics, Danish cartoons, and ideas of respect for Muslim religious figures, and gender and political issues such as intercultural marriage. Similarly, Evolvi (2017) explored how second-generation Italians used blogs to deal with the media portrayals of Muslims and how Islam is presented as a religion that is incompatible with Italian values. She explains that the blog, Yalla (which translates to "Let's go" in Arabic) serves as a third space for young Italian Muslims and as "disruptive flows of dissent".⁷⁰ Similarly, Eva F. Nisa (2018) analyzed how Indonesian Muslim Youth use Instagram, specifically how religious messages on the application influence their understandings of their religion, what it means to be pious, and their life goals. She argues that through Instagram, young Muslim Indonesian women teach each other how to become virtuous Muslims. Instagram provides an alternative space for young Indonesian women where they can construct their religious identities. Furthermore, Rozehnal (2018) suggests that American Sufi communities who are active in offline spaces have a hybrid religious identity that is modern, Muslim, and mystic.⁷¹ Rozehnal refers to it as a "hybrid Sufi organization."⁷² His research demonstrates how Sufi Muslims in the United States are using digital media to create new ways of dealing with issues related to identities, piety, and practices. As well, Schlosser (2012) illustrated how Hajj is represented online and whether religious authority has any influence on these representations. He pointed out that although the internet acts as a decentralised and mass-participatory space that is also transnational and global, it allows allow marginalized groups

⁷⁰ Echchaibi, 2013.

⁷¹ Page 13.

⁷² Page 16.

such as women, youth, converts, and Muslim minority groups to express their perspectives and concerns.

In relation to the online app world, Kushidayati (2019) discusses Quran apps in the Android Playstore and the issue of authenticity that arises from those apps. She used a qualitative approach to analyse Quran apps based on the number of downloads and comments.⁷³ Kushidayati concludes that these apps have led to the development of a new way of worshipping for some users. She finds in the study that regardless of whether the apps are produced by religious institutions or individuals, they don't state sources of texts and translations. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) in Indonesia certifies quality and sources for Islamic texts in all forms of media, including apps. However, Kushidayati points out that this is difficult to do because new apps pop up quite often and it is difficult to identify the developers because of the anonymity that the online world (in this case the Android Playstore) offers. Another important point that is discussed is the advertisements in the apps. Although not all apps have ads, those that they do have not have vetted advertisements, or filters for these ads. This has caused people to view ads that they may consider inappropriate such as women in their undergarments at the bottom of Quranic texts.⁷⁴ Some of these ads also offer additional services or access to more features if the user chooses to upgrade the app. However, where the money ends up is unknown due to the anonymity of the app developers.

Zaman's (2008) work is significant to my research because he researched how American Muslims navigated among the vast resources that they had access to such as the internet,

⁷³ "Quran Apps in Playstore: The Problem of Authentication and Religious Authority." 2019.

⁷⁴ Page 164.

popular scholars, and pamphlets. He refers to *imams* who hosted their own Q&A shows as 'media muftis' and argues that these muftis challenged traditional authority. These include *imams* who upload their sermons on video-hosting sites such as YouTube. He argues that these cyber-muftis should not replace traditional religious education such as from Al Azhar University that is seen as a legitimate source of Islamic knowledge. He uses Imam Eid from Boston as an example, as Iman Eid was referred to as the imam without a mosque because he was replaced with another imam at the Islamic Center of New England. Shortly after his departure, he took his services online by creating his own website. Although there is a tension between *imams* from Al Azhar and those without a similar religious background, Zaman states that the most successful leaders in American Islam are those who have both Al Azhar education and celebrity charisma, such as Hamza Yusuf.

In relation to non-mainstream religious practices, Siti Mazidah Haji Mohamed (2018) argues that new forms of religious practices have formed because of the ease of access to social media. This in turn has resulted in new forms of everyday lived Islam. She illustrates this through studying how Malaysian Muslim women self-represent themselves on Facebook and how they use Facebook for "performing extrinsic religious practices" in their everyday lives. According to them, the performance of religiosity refers to the negotiation of public and private religious selves in practices and acts.⁷⁵ These performances and acts include sharing photos and videos of self-representation and sharing hyperlinks – making this a public affair rather than strictly private. They also point out the significance of individual agency that religiosity on social media allows and how this emphasizes the contextualising of religiosity in online spaces, along with these

⁷⁵ Page 76.

spaces acting as a “place and way of being.”⁷⁶ This is especially true for young Muslim women as that is the demographic that the authors focus on, and this is displayed when some of them identify themselves as a Muslimah.

In the world of cyberspace and in recent developments of social media, podcasts are also included in this area of Islam on the Internet. Scholz et al (2008) examined how podcasts and videocasts are used by Muslim groups to challenge and reinforce religious authority. They analyze how religious authority is legitimized in terms of what is authentic/non-authentic or real/unreal Islam is. Their case studies include: Zaytuna Institute Knowledge Resource Podcast, MeccaOne Media Podcast, Ahmadiyya Podcast, and Alt.muslim Review.

The above-mentioned studies on Muslims use of the internet showcases different aspects of religion and media that influence religious beliefs and practices. They also show that religion and media are intertwined in many different Muslim religious communities. Because of how diverse the Muslim world is, each community views authority online different and uses the Internet in a variety of ways. These studies have aided in my understanding of the way the Muslim world works and has been very useful toward my analysis of this study's findings on Islam and young Muslims in social media.

2.5 LIVED RELIGION

Robert Orsi (2005) first undertook the study of 'Lived Religion' when he went to New York in the late 1970s to begin his fieldwork that focused on Italian American Catholicism. He described Lived Religion as a concept that includes “religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic

⁷⁶ Page 77.

relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places".⁷⁷ In this definition, religion is associated with imagination which is problematic because it suggests religion can be a fantasy rather than a valid assurance of faith and belief in something real. However, Orsi's explanation of Lived Religion has changed over the years. In the 2002 plenary address for the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Orsi defined Lived Religion as, "...attention to institutions and persons, texts and rituals, practice and theology, things, and ideas – all as media of making and unmaking worlds."⁷⁸ The attention to the connection between each of these actions illustrates how scholars of religion fail to acknowledge Lived Religion and how Lived Religion aims to overlook the missing link. Both belief and practice are significant elements of Lived Religion. The emphasis on institutions and persons demonstrates the significance of the relationship between authority and individuals. Texts and rituals, along with practice and theology, shows how one is dependent on the other or how one is influenced by the other. The concept of Lived Religion allows the missing acknowledgement of these components to be studied thoroughly and fill in the existing gap. In analysing the individual aspects of religion, where do the rituals and practices come from? What has motivated the spiritual observance, tradition, or routine? Lived religion helps to answer these questions.

This brings us to Nancy T. Ammerman who has contributed significantly to the study of Lived Religion. In her work with religious and nonreligious groups in Boston and Atlanta, she used methodologies such as life story interviews, photo elicitation interviews, and oral diaries that showed that lived religion can be found in secular, everyday spaces.⁷⁹ She also conducted a

⁷⁷ Page xxxi.

⁷⁸ Page 172.

⁷⁹ *Finding Religion in Everyday Life*".2014. Page 196.

quantitative study where she examined 64 journal articles dating back to 1997, in which the terms “lived religion” or “everyday religion” were used. In *Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers* (2016), she found that out of the 64 articles, 59 emphasized that lived religion is about what ordinary people experience in their everyday lives.⁸⁰ Ammerman points out that lived religion in all these articles claims to be about the common folk and not about religious institutions. She also argued that everyday practices that blurred institutional boundaries should be examined as a part of Lived Religion.⁸¹ In her research in the 1990s, she found that people often referred to the characterization of Christian life as doing good, making the world a better place and living by the Golden Rule (1991). The Golden Rule referred to “care for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need”.⁸² This signified the lived religious practices that people focused on rather than institutional religion. Ammerman (2016) also pointed out that the shift to studying Lived Religion stemmed from the criticism of the way religion had been studied.

Furthermore, Meredith B. McGuire’s focal point on Lived Religion is how religion and spirituality are practiced by ordinary people in their everyday lives. In her book, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (2008), she studied people’s religious and spiritual beliefs and practices that include bodily and emotional experiences at an individual level. Furthermore, she points out that in other sociological approaches (apart from Lived Religion) that attempt to study individuals, the religiosity and the beliefs and practices of individuals are failed to be considered because of how diverse these practices can be and usually are. Rather, they should be analysed

⁸⁰ Page 87.

⁸¹ Page 92.

⁸² Page 203.

by looking at the religious acts and practices as solely “religion-as-practiced.”⁸³ This is where religious beliefs and practices can vary at the individual level. Religion, at an institutional level may have certain specific prescribed practices and rituals, but at the individual level, the practices and rituals may differ by alteration, or fusion, with other religious practices, and may be personalised to the practitioner. While through institutionalised forces, the religious practices may be filtered or ordered to be practiced in a specific way or form, but these limitations are no longer in place once individuals do not identify with said institutions anymore. McGuire also mentions “invisible” elements that can be brought out through the notion of Lived Religion.⁸⁴ This includes nonofficial and unrecognized components of individuals’ lives. These are other features that make lived religion unique and more significant in studying religious and spiritual individuals.

With regards to how Muslims approach Lived Religion, Nadia Jeldtoft (2011) argued that the institutionalisation of Islam paints an unrealistic and impractical picture of Muslims. This unrealistic and impracticability refers to how Muslims practice Islam in their everyday lives, involving diverse religious practices and identities. The “minorities” that Jeldtoft studied are Muslims who are not visible. The visibility of these Muslims does not refer to their physical appearances or any religious symbols, but their participation in the institutionalised and activist versions of Islam. Using the life story narrative methodology, she allowed her participants to tell their own stories and portray religious experiences through their own perspectives. This allowed them to emphasis the “lived” in lived Islam – how they personalized Islamic practices and beliefs.

⁸³ Page 5.

⁸⁴ Page 18.

Similarly, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas' research on religion and culture among second-generation British Bengali youth demonstrates the complexities that coincide with hybrid and hyphenated identities. For *Elastic Orthodoxy: The Tactics of Young Muslim Identity in the East End of London* (2013), he conducted an interview exercise where the participants were able to self-identify using labelled identity options. The participants had options to choose between ethnic, religious, racial, national, and other categories. DeHanas' argument is that Islamic institutions allow young Muslims in that specific region (East End London) to negotiate their religious identity just as well as other factors, such as the influence of parents and media. He uses Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategy and tactics⁸⁵ and applies it to the study of Lived Religion in his research. Both scholars emphasize that Lived Religion is quite present in the ways young Muslims live and understand their religious lives. Similarly, the participants in this present study illustrate the same idea with how they choose to do certain religious practices. This study will present the behaviours and understandings of young Muslims in North America – focusing on attendees from RIS who were primarily Canadian and American. As Muslims continue to understand Islam in personal and diverse ways, they are inevitably faced with Islamophobia, and it is to this theme that we now turn.

⁸⁵ DeHanas builds on Linda Woodhead's theoretical framework on Certeau's concept of strategy and tactics. Woodhead proposes to use this theory to apply it to religion, where power (of those in institutions) can be taken away strategically. These strategies are created by outsiders and include tactics such as creating other sacred spaces and objects like the turban, hijab, relics, and such, where they can have the power to themselves. In other words, this notion of strategy and tactics is an alternative to Lived Religion.

2.6 ISLAMOPHOBIA

Islamophobia is commonly understood as the fear of Islam and Muslims. Many scholars have studied the consequences and effects of Islamophobia, including Jazmin Zine, Todd Green, Hatem Bazian, and Zafar Iqbal, among many others. The term “Islamophobia” itself has been widely debated by scholars over its definitions and use. While many scholars agree that Islamophobia refers to the negative treatments of Muslims and the misrepresentation of Islam, notions of anti-Muslimness are debated. Islamophobia also effects non-Muslim communities and individuals that are perceived to resemble Muslims or Islam, such as non-Muslim Arabs, Sikhs, Latine and other minority religious and ethnic groups. The term “Islamophobia” is often credited to the Runnymede’s Trusts’ Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (CBMI) from 1997 that argued that anti-Muslim prejudice was growing so rapidly that it needed its own vocabulary to describe the causes of the fear and dislike of all or most Muslims.⁸⁶

About Islamophobia in the Western world, Todd Green’s *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (2019) explores multiple understandings of the concept and definitions of Islamophobia. He discusses the history behind the ideas of Islamophobia, including religious, political, and geographical problems and how these are manifested in Europe and the United States. About Europe, he discusses how Muslims are perceived by Europeans and how that perception is influenced from the European colonization of Muslim-majority nations. For the US, he points out the negative impacts of 9/11 and the War on Terror on Muslims and the roles that US politicians and the media play in “othering” Muslims. He also includes

⁸⁶ Page 19.

discussions on the securitization of Muslims in the West, including deportations, torture, and restrictions on the freedom of practicing religion.

Similarly, Zafar Iqbal's *Islamophobia: History, Context and Deconstruction* (2019) identified myths and misunderstandings regarding Islamophobia that are present in contemporary literature in the social sciences. Through historical and contemporary analysis, Iqbal argues that Islamophobia is a multidimensional construct, and all aspects of its manifestations should be considered to provide solutions to combat it. Khaled A. Beydoun's *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (2018) takes into consideration how law and policies shape and encourage anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments in the United States. He argues that Islamophobia should be looked at as a system of bigotry that is influenced by law and governments. He shares accounts of Muslim Americans and their experiences with Islamophobia as they try to live normal lives.

Namira Islam (2018) adds another dimension to this discussion by arguing that Islamophobia is a system of oppression that is upheld by policies and practices in the United States in liberal or left-leaning anti-Islamophobic spaces. She argues that this puts Muslims in cultural categories that paint them as foreign and makes Islam out to be a religion of culture. These spaces are defined as having majority supporters of the Democratic Party that endorse funding on education, health care and other social services. Islam's aim is to show how these individuals fail in addressing and solving Islamophobia, and, in turn, uphold anti-Muslim policies. She argues three main points: 1) they lack structural analysis around anti-Muslim hate; 2) they restrict Muslims into a cultural category; and, 3) they contribute to the erasure of Islam as a

faith.⁸⁷ Some of her suggestions to combat it include increasing internal education and training on racial justice; engaging in solidarity practices; centring Muslim leadership and guidance; and shifting narratives about Muslims in the media to include Muslims who attend religious institutions and dress conservatively (10). Although her focus is on how Islamophobia is encouraged by the American political system, that system has also impacted Canadian Muslims, which will be discussed later in this dissertation. The American participants in this present study discuss how politics has heightened Islamophobia which they have to unwillingly encounter in their everyday lives.

Sabrina Alimahomed-Wilson's (2017) research is also very important because it focuses on women and the Islamophobia that they face. She conducted research on the intersection of gender and Islamophobia in relation to American Muslim women. She conducted 40 semi-structured interviews, and examined FBI hate crimes data and civil reports, to determine the concept of "institutionalized private violence," where institutional power contributes to individuals acting violently towards Muslim women in public office.⁸⁸ In her interviews, 85% of women discussed experiencing verbal assaults and/or threats.⁸⁹ Women dealt with these types of Islamophobic incidents by altering their appearances, avoiding certain places alone, or making sure they have company around.⁹⁰ As a response, some American state authorities have suggested that Muslim women stop wearing their hijab or stay at home, but Alimahomed-Wilson argues that this akin to victim-blaming where people who commit the violence are not held

⁸⁷ Page 1.

⁸⁸ Page 73.

⁸⁹ Page 80.

⁹⁰ Page 79.

responsible, but the victims are scrutinized instead.⁹¹ Many of the female participants in this study demonstrate how they are victims of Islamophobia because of how they look and what they wear.

Although it should not be necessary to prove how prevalent Islamophobia is, an online survey conducted by EKOS Research Associates found that many Canadians are uncomfortable with Muslims and have unfavourable views of Muslim communities. At the same time, they do recognize the problem of religious discrimination and Islamophobia in Canada. The survey, entitled, "A Grave Problem: EKOS Survey on Islamophobia in Canada," was conducted in 2017 with over 1,000 Canadian respondents in partnership with The Canadian Muslim Forum (FMC-CMF) and Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME). Their goals were to learn, 1) how Canadians felt about religious discrimination, Islamophobia, and multiculturalism in Canada; 2) identify problems; and, 3) find out if current political discourse reflects what Canadians think. There were five significant findings from the survey:

- 1) If a hijab-wearing PM were to be elected, Canadians would be least comfortable with that than with any other religious symbol;
- 2) In comparison with other religions, Canadians hold the most negative stereotypes about Muslim Canadians;
- 3) Canadians would rather welcome people of other religion into their families more than they would welcome Muslims;
- 4) Canadians value the protection of religious rights for members of other religions more than they do for Muslims; and,
- 5) Some Canadians believe that Muslims are a monolith community with uniform values.

Islamophobia is also present in online spaces. Imran Awan (2014) studied the rise of anti-Muslim abuse in online spaces by examining 500 tweets from multiple users. He argues that online Islamophobia should be studied and given the same significance as individual and street-level

⁹¹ Page 81.

Islamophobia. Like Awan, Ekman (2015) also examined how the internet provides a space for anti-Muslim sentiments to prevail. He studied European Islamophobic websites where anti-Muslim sentiment and racist content was disguised under Western values and were protected by freedom of speech. Online hate impacts Muslims everyday offline lives. The above research⁹² on Islamophobia illustrates that it is a growing phenomenon that Muslims are faced with every day. Muslims are forced to deal with anti-Muslim attitudes both on personal and professional levels. Systemic and individual Islamophobia is prevalent in Canada and the United States.

2.7 CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITERATURE

The literature review above shows that there is a need for analysis on how young Muslims perceive religious authority and authenticity in online spaces. It also demonstrates that although there are many studies on religion and media that focus on Muslim communities, there is little research on events. The studies show how religion is done and performed online, but not how it impacts offline religious behaviour, and more importantly, what happens at the intersecting point. The hybridity that is a result of online and offline religion is dismissed and it should be urgently studied. As we are living in a COVID-19 world, people have adapted and brought religion online but have also returned to physical religion. Will this continue and how will this space – the hybridity – be impacted by this? The concept of 'convergent spaces' will shine light on this matter.

⁹² Also see: Taras 2012, and Weaver 2013.

2.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature for this dissertation. It has been made clear that there is vast research in the main research areas of this dissertation. However, a gap certainly exists when it comes to how young Muslims in North America look for religious authority and how this relates to their needs and wants of community and belonging at an intersecting space. Islam occurs both in online and offline spaces, but what happens in hybrid spaces such as Reviving the Islamic Spirit? The Internet plays a large role in people's religious lives, especially for young Muslims who struggle with religious identity and authority issues.

CHAPTER THREE: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Research Design

In this chapter, I give an overview of the theoretical used in this study. I also explain my methodological choices, the methods that I used in this study, and the process of moving from data to results and findings. To date, there has been no qualitative study on attendees of RIS and how young Muslims behave and are influenced religiously in both physical and virtual spaces and come together in one space that merges online and offline settings. As someone whose family emigrated to Canada from a Muslim-majority country, I had to find ways to negotiate my Muslim identity and find spaces that would allow me to highlight both my origin and Canadian identities. Islam was at the core of my identity, not only because I was born into a practicing Muslim family, but also because I felt like Islam is where I belonged. No matter where I went, I could rely on Islam as a place of familiarity. By thinking of Islam as a place, I understood it as something that would always be there for me. However, one main question that I faced when thinking of Islam as a place, was what kind of Islam did I belong to? Should I stick to labels such as conservative, orthodox, Wahhabi, Sunni, Sufi... all these categories that many Muslims have adapted? As I sought the type of Islam that I was comfortable with, I wanted to know how other self-identifying Muslims were living – especially those who were young like myself. I remember seeing young Muslims during my undergraduate years who would wear hijabs in non-traditional ways. I met Muslims who did not pray five times a day, but they fasted all 30 days of Ramadan. Some Muslims did not eat halal food, but would pray five times every day, I also encountered those who blended different Muslim traditions such as Sunni and Shia Islam, resulting in the so-called “Sushi” Islam. I wondered if this was allowed, and if so, allowed by who? Who is making Islamic rules? Do all Muslims rely on Sharia Law to interpret the Quran? These kinds of religious identity crisis-relating

questions and meeting Muslims who practice Islam in non-normative ways brought me to the concept of Lived Religion – specifically 'Lived Islam' which is why the emphasis on self-identifying Muslims is so important to me. The participants in this study are Muslims who identify as Muslims, as opposed to those who others consider to be Muslim from a specific religious worldview.

Lived Islam allowed me to examine the various ways that Muslims lived their lives. I was interested in how Islam was a part of their daily life. Where would they place and locate Islam while going to work, living with family, interacting with non-Muslims, along with other beliefs and practices? What about the mosque? Did the Muslims in my study all attend any mosque? What about any other religious or spiritual places? Is institutional Islam just as important to them as other Islamic aspects? Were they doing Islam in physical spaces only? Or did that include virtual spaces? There has been no academic research conducted on RIS or its attendees. At RIS, people gather from around the world to participate in the three-day convention. In this convention, there are several programs in which people can participate. These include listening to lectures by prominent religious leaders in the community such as Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir, Omar Suleiman, Dahlia Mogahed, and many more. There's also a marketplace section in the convention centre, along with a matrimonial program, performance and Q&A stage called the 360 Stage, Quran recitation contests, and much more.

Two primary methods were used to conduct this study. The ethnographic work included in-depth interviews, and participant observation at RIS. The interviews were conducted with attendees of RIS who volunteered to discuss their lived Islam and RIS experiences. A total of 50 interviews were conducted. Participant observation was done by attending RIS. This chapter will

outline both the theoretical framework and methodologies used for this research. First, it will explain the significance of using Lived Religion as a theoretical framework for this study. Second, it will describe the research sample and research design that discusses the criteria for selection, the sampling strategy used, and where and how the sample sourcing was done. Third, it discusses limitations and delimitations of the study including ethical considerations. Prior to this study there was little or no research done specifically on this generation in relation to their online and offline religious activities. This study fills this gap.

3.1 LIVED RELIGION/ISLAM AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lived Religion as a theoretical framework not only allowed individuals to think about the religious and spiritual activities that they did outside of the mosque, but also about the things that they did online for religious or spiritual purposes. Anything that they did and considered religious or spiritual outside of institutional Islam is considered a form of Lived Religion. Lived Religion – in this sense – is about how Muslims incorporate Islam into their daily lives without explicitly adhering to a single mosque or religious leader. For example, some Muslims would visit the mosque more than one time per day for the typical congregational prayer. In my doctoral study, many of the Muslim men stated that they visited the mosque, especially on Fridays when they had the opportunity to do so, for the Friday congregational prayers. Some would stay following the prayer for the formal sermon – also known as *khutbah* (Islamic sermon). Other participants said that they would visit the mosque to speak to an imam about religious topics and advice. These parts of their daily lives – going to the mosque for prayer, *khutbah*, or to talk to an *imam* – can be considered a part of institutional Islam. However, anything outside of that is Lived Religion, such as creating routines on how and when to pray, interpreting religious matters in

ways that relate to themselves, finding connections to Islam in ways that are not influenced or approved by *imams* or other religious authority figures. In this study, participants discussed their views on institutional Islam which revealed the intersection of their online and offline worlds. People were able to practice Islam in their own ways in both online and offline spaces. Their religion was practiced as a way of lived Islam whether the role of religious institutions mattered to them or not. Practices and situations that were adapted to people's own daily lives illustrated that lived religion occurs. Therefore, it was very important for my study to include Lived Religion as a theoretical framework. I was able to pinpoint what religious practices and rituals people do in their everyday lives. I inquired with my participants about what they considered religious and what spaces they considered as religious or spiritual. Lived Islam in this regard meant whatever participants attributed with their beliefs to be Muslim. For example, for one participant spending time in nature and going for walks or hikes meant for her that she could connect with God in a natural environment. Instead of visiting the mosque to connect with God, she prefers to do so in a natural environment outdoors. Another participant said that she considered her room as a spiritual place because it is where she sits down to reflect on her day and pray. She would pray her five prayers a day there. She would take time to read the Quran in that place too. It was a space where she felt she could do religious things and be safe.

Furthermore, according to Nathal M. Dessing in "How to Study Everyday Islam" (2013), emphasis on heteroglossic contexts is much needed. Heteroglossic contexts refers to public places where the diversity of people is clearly visible including their languages and religions. Dessing claims that heteroglossic contexts present many opportunities such as the neutrality of religions in public settings rather than in religious institutions and taking the emphasis of religion

away in public spaces, showing the diversity of religious traditions, and finding forms of religiosity in specific contexts.⁹³ In contexts such as this, studying Lived Religion is made possible and people can express their own religiosity in private or public settings.

Studying the lives of these participants through the Lived Religion framework is very important. It tells us as researchers a great deal about how people practice religion outside of religious institutions and the influence of religious leaders. It illustrates a particular understanding of Islam that is not found in mainstream Islam. By mainstream Islam, I am referring to what most people know about Muslims. Most people can tell you that Muslims pray five times a day and fast during Ramadan. Muslim themselves can tell you that in addition to daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan, Muslims follow three more pillars of Islam, which is to say and believe in the *shahada* (proclamation of faith in Allah and Muhammad as his messenger and prophet), giving *zakat* (charity), and undertaking *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) if they can afford to do so. However, Islam is not as straightforward as it is made out to be. Although these are the five pillars of Islam, Muslims have additional beliefs, practices, and ways of worship. The worldwide Muslim community is divided in terms of Islamic theology and practices. The focus on this study is not on Islamic theology, but it seeks to explore how Muslims practice Islam. How do they personalize Islamic practices? For example, the four schools of thought in Sunni Islam have different understandings of *fiqh* or Islamic law. However, most of the major issues and debate are solved by a consensus of scholars. There are minor differences in the schools of thought such as when to pray or how many *rakah* (act of bowing down in prayer) one must pray. These types of issues are often discussing in Islamic law and Muslims are influenced by them in how they

⁹³ Page 40.

practice Islam in their everyday lives. Nonetheless, these issues do not dominate the lives of some Muslims as they have their own ways and methods of praying and just “doing” Islam.

As I observed people and interactions at Reviving the Islamic Spirit, it was obvious that people had their own ways of being Muslim and their own understandings of Islam. For example, in terms of dressing, there were Muslim women who wore the niqab and were fully covered. There were also Muslim women who did not wear the hijab and were dressed in what could be categorized as Western clothing – jeans and t-shirts. There were other Muslim women who were in the middle such as wearing the hijab, but still wearing Western clothing. Some Muslims may attribute their Muslimness to the way that they dress but others might not. The concept of modesty and Islamic clothing is understood differently by Muslims. For some, it may mean to be covered from head to toe in loose clothing, while for others it could mean wearing whatever they want but being modest in terms of behaviour and lowering their gaze. Some of the participants in this study discuss this. One of the participants described herself as someone who is modest. She would wear the hijab and loose clothing while praying but she would wear a bikini at the beach in public. Covering her body with loose clothing all the time did not matter to her, yet she still considered herself modest in behaviour and dress. Situations like this bring out lived Islam because many Islamic ideas and concepts are understood differently by different people. This study shows that there is no one single way of being Muslim. The Muslim community – especially the community that is composed of Millennials and Gen Zs – is diverse in their varied understandings of Islam.

3.2 ETHICS PROTOCOL AND RESEARCH SAMPLE

The primary research and recruitment site was Reviving the Islamic Spirit at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. When I first attended RIS in 2016 as a fresh MA graduate, I was fascinated with the diversity of Muslims that I saw there. It seemed to me that RIS offered this welcoming space where people could partake in various activities from virtual reality experiences to matrimonial services. What made it even more interesting to me was that the guest speakers throughout the three days were all popular *imams* that I once used to watch on YouTube! They were all there in-person along with well-known athletes, celebrities, and government officials. Since I had just completed my MA in the construction of Muslim identity and religious information on the internet, I knew that I would want my future doctoral project to focus on this space that RIS had created. For my doctoral fieldwork, I attended RIS in 2018 and 2019 to observe and recruit participants from the convention. My recruitment posters were also shared on my personal social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I spent a total of 16 months exploring the field and conducting this research. In 2018, I stayed mostly in the marketplace portion of the convention. The marketplace was a place where small businesses and non-profit organizations (NPO) set up their booths. The marketplace also had a portion of the space dedicated for prayer including congregational prayer. A large space was also set up for food vendors who sold all varieties of halal food. The 360-stage was set up in the middle of the marketplace where there were musical performances, Q&A sessions with religious leaders, academics, and other celebrated people, along with kids' programs. In 2019, I was given a booth in the marketplace alongside other NPOs who were there with posters, petitions, and freebies. I fit right in with my recruitment posters and cards. Including both years, I had a total of 95 signups.

I was able to contact and schedule interviews with about 35 people, while the other participants contacted me on social media or through snowball sampling, where people who I already interviewed shared my contact information with them. Initially, I wanted to conduct follow up interviews with my participants after one year. However, because I found it difficult to recruit people in the first place because many of them would not be able to schedule interviews, I decided to omit the follow up interview plan. For those participants that I had already conducted a first interview, when I asked them about a follow-up interview, they were hesitant about their availabilities since it was very far in advance. I decided that this was not practical for my participants.

On average, 20,000 people attend this convention every year since it started in 2000.⁹⁴ RIS was a place where Muslims on any point of the religiosity spectrum met and experienced a sense of belonging. Most of the participants stated that a sense of community and sense of belonging were two of the main reasons they chose to attend RIS. I followed four steps to design and recruit for my study: 1) sample universe; 2) sample size; 3) sample strategy; and 4) sample source, as shown below (figure 4). I discuss these steps in the next subsections.

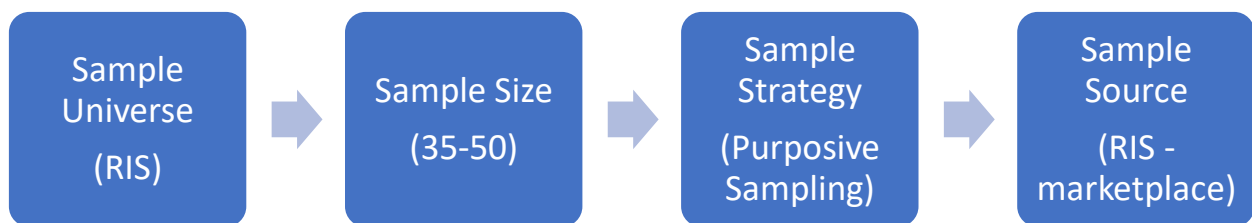


Figure 4: Illustrating the process of designing and obtaining the research sample.

⁹⁴ This information was obtained through personal interviews with RIS volunteers who have been working with RIS for a long time.

First, the sample universe was designed with the dynamics of RIS in mind. RIS attendees were selected as the study and target population. A criterion was set which considered attributes for inclusion and exclusion. They had to meet the following criteria to be eligible to volunteer:

- 1) Must have attended RIS in 2018 or 2019;
- 2) Must self-identify as Muslim;
- 3) Must be between the ages of 18-38 at the time of study;
- 4) Must have a social media presence; and,
- 5) Must be a Citizen/Permanent Resident of USA or Canada.

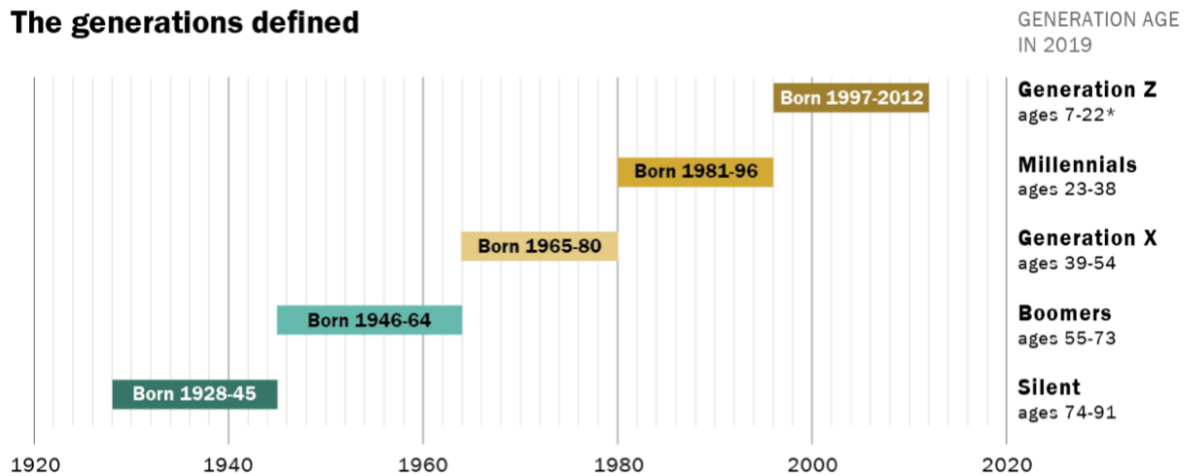
Although an issue with this kind of approach to sampling is that it would result in a homogeneous sample,⁹⁵ this was my target group of potential participants. The homogeneity would create a clear participant group based on the context of my theoretical framework of Lived Religion and methodology of qualitative interviews. The reason I chose to select participants based on a specific age range was because I wanted to focus on the Millennial generation. According to the Pew Research Center, the Millennial generation refers to those born between 1981 to 1996 (see figure 5).⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Robinson. 2014, "Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide", 26.

⁹⁶ https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/ft_19-01-17_generations_2019/

The generations defined

The generations defined



*No chronological endpoint has been set for this group. For this analysis, Generation Z is defined as those ages 7 to 22 in 2019.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 5 shows the generations, their birth years, and ages, as per 2019 from the PEW Research Center.

Second, a research sample size had to be determined. In total, the research sample included qualitative interviews with 50 people. I planned to interview between 35-50 people. These were my numbers to achieve a nomothetic goal⁹⁷ which would help to prove the usefulness of the Lived Religion theory among young Muslims at RIS. This sample size was also practical, and I was able to examine each interview individually. I could look for patterns within each interview and develop a generalization of the results. Furthermore, using the concept of “information power”, this sample size was sufficient. This term refers to a sample size that is dependent on the purpose, specificity, theory, and analysis of the study.⁹⁸ Having 35-50 participants, I was able to reach saturation. The interviews were done between January 2019 to March 2020. Each

⁹⁷ Page 19.

⁹⁸ Malterud et. al. 2016.

interview was on average one hour long. They were conducted by me, and audio recorded. Each participant was interviewed once, and the interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were semi-structured. These interviews took place in-person, on the phone, and through video call, depending on the interviewee's preference and availability. In-person places included public places like cafes and libraries. Video calls were done on platforms such as Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp video, and FaceTime video. Because the interviews were done between 2019-2020, COVID-19 limitations forced telephone and virtual interviews. Some participants were hesitant with meeting up in-person at the beginning of the pandemic and opted for the video call interview instead. No follow-up interviews were conducted although they were included in the initial research design.

Third, a sample strategy had to be selected to ensure that the participants in the study would offer perspectives of their RIS and lived religion experiences for young Muslims at RIS. This was important for me in this study because I wanted to make sure that I located the voices of young Muslims and learned how they experience RIS and practice Islam in online and offline spaces, rather than the experiences of older generations. Because I had to keep my thesis manageable, I decided to focus on younger generations of Muslims at RIS. Hence, stratified sampling was used, which is one type of purposive sampling.⁹⁹ Robinson explains stratified sampling below:

In a stratified sample, the researcher first selects the particular categories or groups of cases that he/she considers should be purposively included in the final sample. The sample is then divided up or "stratified" according to these categories, and a target number of participants are allocated to each one. Stratification categories can be geographical, demographic, socioeconomic, physical or psychological; the only

⁹⁹ Page 32.

requirement is that there is a clear theoretical rationale for assuming that the resulting groups will differ in some meaningful way.¹⁰⁰

The participants all resided within the USA and Canada and held citizenship or were permanent residents. The reason for this requirement was because RIS gets many visitors from around the world. To focus on one region given the limits of a doctoral research project, I chose to specify USA and Canada in the criteria. In total, 42 of the participants were Canadian and 8 were American. 31 of these participants were from the Greater Toronto Area (Toronto, Mississauga, and Brampton) while others were in cities including Ottawa, Montreal, Kingston, London, and Calgary. All but one of the participants self-affiliated with Sunni Islam. The one exception identified as Shia Muslim. Education level ranged from high school to doctoral studies, and occupations included Personal Support Worker, Welder, High School Teacher, Administrative Assistant, Military Chaplain, among others. Some of the participants were students who were studying law, health, criminology, sociology, and public policy.

Lastly, sample sourcing occurred at RIS on-site. Information about the study was shared with potential participants. In 2018, I walked around with recruitment cards that had the participant criteria on it. As I handed it to people, I told them about my study and answered any questions that they had for me. If they expressed interest in participating, I asked them to sign up and provide me with their name, phone number, and email address. In 2019, when I was given a booth with the vendors, potential participants approached me and inquired more about the study. I had put out recruitment cards and posters on my table and as people made their way

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

along the non-profit organizations and other vendors, many stopped by to inquire more about my doctoral research and signed-up to participate in my study.

Prior to any data collection, ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Ottawa's Office of Research and Ethics Integrity in 2018. The project was designed in a way where participants would not face any risks other than those that they may face in their everyday lives. Participants were informed that they would benefit from participating in this study by being able to reflect on their religious beliefs and practices. They would also benefit by having the opportunity to contribute to the growing research on religion and online media, and Islam online. They were assured that their personal information would remain confidential and that their anonymity would be protected. Their real names would not be used in any reports, presentations, or this dissertation. In addition to this, they were informed that they would not receive any compensation for participating in this thesis project. They were also informed that they were under no obligation to participate and can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions without any negative consequences.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To analyse the data, the first step after conducting the interviews was to transcribe them. They were all transcribed manually by me. Then, the data was coded into broad themes based on the patterns that emerged in the data.

Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to study the lived experiences of participants in relation to their views on lived religion, their ways of practicing Islam, and the social networks that they are a part of on the internet and at RIS. Irvine et al (2012) argue that

while in-person/face-to-face are considered the best possible way to conduct interviews, telephone interviews result in “more nuanced or critical reflections on the extent to which the lack of visual cues affects the interaction in practice.”¹⁰¹ I believe that this applies to video call interviews as well. Because COVID-19 prevented some in-person interviews, both telephone and video call interviews were used for some interviews, which offered convenience of time and space to the interviewees. They could cut out commute time; there was no need to search for a public place where audio recording would be possible, and it would ease any social anxiety that participants may have. One of the main critiques of telephone interviews is that it does not allow space for meaningful conversation because visual cues are not present and that may pose a challenge for clarification.¹⁰² However, this may also happen in face-to-face interviews. It is the interviewer’s responsibility to clarify and ensure that the interviewee understands the questions. This can be overcome by paying attention to the tone of voice of the interviewee. The interviews conducted in this research on video call and telephone produced similar conversations and points of discussion in comparison to the in-person interviews. The length of time for each of these interviews were also the same as the in-person interviews.

Another possible disadvantage of telephone interviews is not being able to monitor any responses and emotions such as confusion or distress.¹⁰³ This problem can be solved through Conversational Analysis where the structures and sequences of speaking are examined.¹⁰⁴ It is also thought that telephone interviews are more tiring and demanding than face-to-face

¹⁰¹ Page 87.

¹⁰² Page 90.

¹⁰³ Page 91.

¹⁰⁴ Page 93.

interviews.¹⁰⁵ Because I did a combination of in-person, virtual, and phone interviews I argue that this is not the case. If participants are interested in the topic of study, then they will be enthusiastic throughout the entire interview whether it is on the phone, virtual, or in-person. I noticed this because I was the only one conducting all 50 of the interviews. Irvine et al (2012) argue that the Jeffersonian transcription system works well to overcome most of these issues.¹⁰⁶ In this system, intonation, changes in volume, speaker overlap, intake and exhalation of breath, pauses and their duration are examined. While I did not follow this system entirely, I did take this into consideration when the interviewees would pause for a significant duration, interrupt each other (in the case of one couple's interview that I conducted), and signify any hesitations or tokens (i.e., "oh," "ahh," "hmmm," etc.) that they had when attempting to answer a question or in narrating their stories. Irvine et al (2012) found the following findings in their comparison of in-person and telephone interviews, which were similar to my telephone and virtual interviews:

- 1) completion or formulation of interviewee talk by the researcher was more common in face-to-face interviews;
- 2) interviewee requests for clarification were slightly more common in telephone interviews;
- 3) vocalized acknowledgements given by the researcher were less frequent in telephone interviews;
- 4) interviewee checks on the adequacy of their responses to the researcher's questions were more common in telephone interviews; and
- 5) telephone interviews tended to be shorter than face-to-face interviews¹⁰⁷

I did not experience any interviews where I had to complete any thoughts on behalf of the interviewees. In terms of comprehension, I had to clarify questions in both interview modes about the same number of times in face-to-face, virtual, and telephone. In my virtual and

¹⁰⁵ Page 91.

¹⁰⁶ Page 93.

¹⁰⁷ Page 100.

telephone interviews, I did not have to prompt for any answers or acknowledge anything verbally. I let the interviewees speak as much as they wanted. Very rarely I had to stop to remind them to stay on track with their answers. All my interviews were about an hour long regardless of which interview mode I used.

Musante and DeWalt (2010) claim that using multiple research methods makes research projects most effective. I incorporated qualitative interviews with participant observation. Participant observation helped me to uncover how participants at RIS interacted with religious people in power. Many 'celebrity *imams*' were not only there as invited speakers, but some of them were also there for the interactive 360 Stage portion of the bazaar where people could interact with them in-person. Tourage (2012) describes the RIS speakers as including:

American converts as well as some of those who for the lack of a better term will be called 'born Muslims' among its motivational and or academic speakers. The website for the 2010 convention in Toronto attended by about 15,000–20,000 people have a biographical sketch of the well-known regular speakers.¹⁰⁸

As a participant observer, I attended Reviving the Islamic Spirit for three days in both 2018 and 2019. I did not have to change the way I look or behave because I was already a part of the Canadian Muslim community. This was a familiar cultural setting for me. I took part in socializing at the bazaar and attending the lectures. In late 2018 before the convention in December, I sent out an email to the RIS organizers. I told them about my study and what I aimed to do at the conference which was to advertise my study and look for potential participants. I needed to get their permission because I did not want it to seem like I was bothering any of the attendees. All the vendors and businesses at RIS had gotten their permission to be at RIS. At first, they were

¹⁰⁸ Tourage. 2012. Performing belief and reviving Islam: Prominent (white male) converts In Muslim Revival Conventions" 210.

hesitant to give me permission. I had to convince them that this was for my doctoral project and any potential participants would be voluntarily interviewing with me with full information about the study provided to them. They informed me that only their sponsors are allowed to give out flyers and put-up posters, but because this was for my doctoral research, they would make an exception for me.

I was permitted to recruit for my research only if I did it at the marketplace. The main area out of the marketplace and lecture halls was reserved for the sponsors. I had to make sure that I was not shy and that I socialized with people. I also had to keep in mind that I am in a Muslim space as a Muslim woman. My gender played a role in how I was expected to socialize with others in this setting. For example, when I saw some of the religious leaders who were at RIS as invited speakers in the marketplace, they were surrounded by young men. It meant that I could not just go up to them and start speaking to them. In a way, it seemed like you had to be one of 'the boys' to speak to these leaders in an informal setting.

I argue and illustrate in my study that RIS is a 'convergent space' because it brings together elements of online and offline worlds. The online aspect of RIS comes from social media posts that are promoted by RIS speakers and attendees on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Social media is a significant aspect for RIS, its speakers, and the attendees. Throughout this thesis, I draw on the social media profiles of selected speakers like Mufti Menk, Yasir Qadhi, Suhaib Webb, and other religious leaders, along with discussing social media and internet use with participants to show the importance of social media. RIS as an event in a physical offline location allows people to be present and partake in religious and communal activities in person. Because both online and offline are occurring in this space, it ends up creating a 'convergent space'. It is

not mixing the elements together to create a hybrid space, but instead it allows both the offline and online worlds to occur simultaneously.

When I started transcribing the interviews, I noticed that certain themes were already starting to emerge. For example, participants were describing the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention as a place of belonging. Throughout each of the interviews, they spoke about feeling as if they are part of a community when they attended RIS. They got a certain feeling of belonging here that they were not able to get anywhere else. This feeling was compared to being in a Muslim environment where everything is familiar, unlike going into the workplace or an educational institution where they felt like an outsider. I knew that this would have to be analyzed further and discussed in this dissertation. Another theme that I saw when I was transcribing was of lived Islam. Participants started to describe some of the things that they did when asked about how they practiced Islam. These things that they talked about were usually non-prescribed rituals and practices from religious institutions or religious people. This means that they founded the practices and rituals on their own and made them meaningful. For example, one participant explained that to her practicing Islam meant connecting with nature. She would take time out of her day to go on walks and hikes, and this was when she could connect with nature, in turn connecting with Allah. Similarly, another participant said the same thing, that she would take her dog on hikes, and this is when she felt closest to Allah. Because these practices and rituals are individualistic and different from mainstream Islam, I identify them as lived Islam. People choose to do these things on their own without any influences from mosques or Islamic authority figures. They considered going out on walks and/or hikes as something Islam.

Therefore, lived Islam was a theme that was emerging before I even got started on coding.

Transcription of all 50 interviews took a couple of months, which was followed by coding.

I decided to focus on the following themes, which I colour-coded:

1. *Ijtihad*
2. Lived Islamic Practices and Beliefs
3. Cyber-Islamic Environments (CIE)
4. Sense of Belonging and Community at Reviving the Islamic Spirit Convention
5. Significance of Reviving the Islamic Spirit Convention
6. Being Muslim in Canada and the United States
7. 9/11 and Islamophobia
8. Authority and Authenticity, (which was further divided into specific religious authority figures identified by the majority of the participants)

3.4 LIMITATIONS/DEMILITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At first, I was very ambitious when I was formulating my research aims and objectives. I wanted to interview the religious leaders who were speakers at Reviving the Islamic Spirit, along with interviewing the attendees, and other Muslims who did not attend RIS. However, this was not realistic as I would not be able to do all of it given the time limit to complete my doctoral degree. I had to narrow down my research aims and objectives to make sure that they were attainable within a certain timeframe. To do this, I ended up focusing on RIS as a hybrid space and interviewing its attendees on the advice of my thesis supervisor and other faculty members.

As I undertook this research, I knew that I had some advantages that other researchers may not have. I was a visible Muslim woman attending RIS to speak with other Muslims. I fit right in with the Muslim crowd because of how I looked and dressed. Wearing a hijab is a part of my Muslim identity and this gave me an advantage as an attendee at RIS. Because of my visibility as a Muslim, I believe that other Muslims trusted me to speak about such sensitive matters like

religiosity and beliefs. This positionality as an insider gave me access to engage and a deeper understanding of this 'convergent space'. While this was something positive for my research, having this access to the Muslim community, I had to put my Muslim bias aside and go to the event as a social scientist. I was a researcher that was at RIS to talk to people about religion, religious leaders, online and offline spaces, and observe the interactions and programs at RIS. In addition to this, I had to adjust my way of dressing. I had to make sure that I was dressed in a neutral manner where if I had the opportunity to chat with male religious leaders, they would be comfortable given that the space I was going to was majority Muslim. I had contacted the organizers of RIS to get their permission to recruit participants for this study on-site. I did not hear back from them for some time which made me panic a bit, but after sending a follow up email, they finally responded. RIS updates their website every year to promote the event every year. However, they are not active all year round. In addition to sending them emails, I reached out to them on their Facebook and Instagram accounts. I got a response right away from their social media accounts first, then by email.

After the first year of recruitment, I did not manage to recruit 50 people for interviews. Although I had about 50 people signed-up to be contacted, many did not respond back to me after my initial follow ups after the convention. Therefore, I had to conduct a second year of recruitment, and this proved to be successful. I believe it was because I was given a booth at the marketplace which made me more official, as opposed to just walking around chatting to people like I had done the previous year. In my last year, I had more than 50 people who had signed up to be contacted and the response rate was much higher. With recruitment at Reviving the Islamic Spirit and through the snowball method, I managed to interview exactly 50 people. Another

limitation that I faced was the lack of literature and scholarly work on religious events like RIS. Because there has not been much studied on religious events like RIS – especially on Muslim events – I had to develop my research in a way to address this. There has been some research conducted on megachurches and Catholic events, but there is nothing on conventions like RIS, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), or the Islamic Community of North America (ICNA). Although there is little research on the roles of organizations like ISNA and ICNA, nothing has been done on their annual conventions and their impacts on Islam and Muslims. Even though this can be considered as a limitation for my research, it also served as an opportunity for conducting my research project on RIS. Because RIS is such a large event and it is organized by volunteers, it was difficult to get in touch with those who did not have a physical office or regular access to email. I was speaking to a head volunteer, who gave me her phone number, and I contacted her when I arrived at RIS so she could show me around the areas in which I was allowed to recruit and where I could not. These are some of the limitations and ethical considerations that I had during the scope of this research project.

3.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the theoretical framework used for this study. I used the concept of Lived Religion to understand how Islam is enforced in the everyday lives of people in this study. Lived religion is often in places that are not obvious to institutional religion, such as people praying alone in the park, setting up a spiritual space in their bedrooms, or creating other unique religious practices that is Islam to them alone. Lived Religion was used as a guiding theoretical framework to examine what religious and spiritual activities individuals did outside of the

religious institutions and away from the influence from religious people – including going online for religious matters.

CHAPTER FOUR: "RIS IS A GREAT REMINDER FOR EVERY MUSLIM": RESEARCH FINDINGS

I like RIS because you can meet people from around the world. Like you meet people... and it's also like a reminder for us Muslims in the west... it's hard from day to day to keep up with our religion especially with work... like in our countries in different from here so it is a nice reminder to go there and to acknowledge our religion and take time to listen to what they have to say... honestly the best way to say is that it's a great reminder. I think RIS is a great reminder for every Muslim. (P10)

Honestly, the one thing that I love about being there is how a part of the Muslim community I feel like and how I just... how I just love seeing the whole Muslim community of the GTA there and just bonding with them, going to lectures with them and seeing people I haven't seen in so long. It's just such a nice reminder because I go to university and it's just like all people around me and like it's hard to lose sight of your *deen* [Quranic term for "religion"] and all so when I come, it reinforces that for me. (P5)

I studied social sciences for most of my life, so I put things in categories. What I say the evolution of RIS – it helped me understand, you know diversity of the Muslim community and how each community articulates a normative understanding of how the community should be, and it helped me understand all of these various groups are in fact just human responses to historic contingencies. Things like that. And that gave me a good understanding of Muslim – I'm a convert, so when I first started going to RIS, I only knew Muslims for a year or two, and at that point in time it was very much, you're Muslim or not Muslim, but when I experienced RIS, it gave me a breath of what the community really is. (P9)

It's like Ramadan. You know how Ramadan comes and a checkpoint in your year... I know it is coming. You are aware of it before it comes. It stays with you after. It is like a checkpoint to let me re-evaluate what I am doing with my life. Let me check in with my life. Even Ramadan, it is opposite side of the year from RIS. It is great because you get checkpoints in different times of the year. I would say yeah, it changes it in that way, minor. (P13)

These two participants illustrate the importance of Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention for them. They explain why they enjoy attending it every year and the sense of belonging and community that they feel at RIS. RIS is a reminder for them. RIS reinforces their religious practices and beliefs. Like P5 and P10, all of the other participants discussed their reasons for attending RIS. This was one of the purposes of this study. Although RIS participants bring their own understandings of Islam to this convention, they are also influenced by their attendance and

activities at RIS. The speakers that they watch and listen to, the interactions that they have with Muslim-owned businesses, non-profit organizations, and other attendees, and participating in activities like Question-and-Answer sessions with Muslim entertainers, authors, or religious authority figures, and similar factors, all leave the attendees with things to think about. This includes thinking about Islamic beliefs and practices. RIS as a 'convergent space' allows the online and offline worlds that influence the ways that Muslims choose to live come together. It offers attendees an opportunity to see religious authority figures who they seek online in a physical space. This is why RIS becomes a 'convergent space'. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the following research questions guided this doctoral research:

- 1) What attracts young Muslims to RIS? What are their aims and objectives for attending RIS?
- 2) Does participation at RIS influence online and offline religious behaviours? If so, in which ways?
- 3) How are digital elements of online religion (such as virtual religious practices and religious forum discussions) brought into offline spaces like RIS?
- 4) What happens when the two physical and virtual religious spaces come together such as the intersection at RIS?

In this chapter, I will first present an overview of the participants. Their backgrounds will reveal some of the multiple factors that made an impact on their views of Islamic matters and how they choose to practice and understand Islam in their everyday lives. It will then present the main findings of the study. RIS acted as a space that felt safe for visible expressions of faith and their Muslimness for the participants. It also effectively acts as a space where multiple religious authorities are brought together from both online and offline worlds.

Discussing how participants practice Islam and how they navigate through the endless options of religious interpretation found online, *ijtihad* was brought up multiple times. Thus, I will discuss what *ijtihad* means and how it is used by the participants in terms of being digitally

pious. This leads to understanding how authority and authenticity are understood by the participants, who they consider to be religious authority, and how Islam is personalized by these young Muslims.

The next section will be on RIS itself. How does the understanding of lived Islam translate to attending RIS, and what does RIS represent for its attendees? Finally, I will touch upon the instances of Islamophobia that the participants highlighted and what it means to them to be Muslim in North America.

4.1 Participant Overview

In total, there were 50 participants in this study. The majority (44) of them were Canadian citizens, while the others (6) were American citizens, including one participant who had dual citizenship. 34 identified as female and 16 identified as male. Their ages ranged from 18-38 as per the participation requirements. As for religious affiliation, 31 identified as being just Muslims, 18 as Sunni Muslims, and only one as being affiliated with a mix of Sufi and Salafi Muslim. Their self-identified religious affiliations are significant to consider because they tell us about how they understand their Islamic beliefs. The communities that they identify with may have specific *madhab* (school of thought) that they follow, or certain religious practices that other Muslim communities may not practice. Within the global Muslim community, there are many sectarian divisions and intra-faith issues. In some interviews, these issues were brought up and that is why some of the participants decided to only self-identify as “Muslim” rather than with a specific sect.

In this research, the focus was on Muslims from the Millennial generation. Those born between 1985 to 1996 were selected as participants. I chose to focus on this age group because social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were emerging when they would

have been in their adolescent years. The Harris Poll was conducted in the United States with over 1,000 consumers on their social media use. They organized their data according to generations and they found that 72% of Millennials believe that social media is very important in their lives.¹⁰⁹ This was the highest number out of all the other generations that were included in their survey: Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Z. Interviews with them revealed that many participants showed influences of other generations. There was a spectrum of generational difference in the way these people lived their lives including how they practiced religion and spirituality in their everyday lives. Those born in the late 80s were influenced by Gen X and those born in the 90s were familiar with trends that emerged from the generation after them also known as Gen Z. In this research, themes that emerged from interviewing Muslim Millennials in North America include searching for a sense of belonging/community, support or criticism of religious authority figures, interest in Muslim fashion and food, and religious/spiritual practices as institutional or individual-based.

4.2 Significance of Reviving the Islamic Spirit

I would like to begin with highlighting why participants in this study found the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention to be very important in their lives. P49, a 24-year-old-male, expressed how fulfilling it was for him to see other attendees of RIS expressing their emotions. The year that he attended RIS, he was volunteering at one of the vendor booths and he compared seeing emotions of others to drinking water. He thinks that, just like how one can only truly taste water after being deprived of it, he feels the same way about seeing people at RIS being emotional. He “feels” it

¹⁰⁹ “How Different Generations Use Social Media-and What This Means for Your Business.” 2021.

and is pleased to see people being happy and emotional at RIS. He says that because he is always socially active and within the Muslim community, sometimes he does not realize the sentiments behind his desire to volunteer, but at RIS these welcomed feelings emerge by observing attendees while he is volunteering there. Therefore, going to RIS is important for him.

Ok, so those 3 days I was volunteering for RIS, the one that just passed by... it was like... the most immersive thing I have ever done Islamic-wise. You are there for 3 days and ok, so for me the way it is... I am kind of used to volunteering. I'm super used to being active. So, I don't notice if I volunteer anywhere whether it is good. I don't notice or feel that but the 3 days at RIS, I felt it. It was the Friday. I am kind of like desensitized. You know when you do something for a long time, it's not new anymore? It's like drinking water. You drink it every day but you only really know the taste when for example, we are working out and we are deprived of it. Finally get a taste of water and it is the best taste. So, it was different. The 3 days I realized.... The best thing for RIS for me was seeing people happy and going with a smile. People are just.... crying, emotions, just at peace. I think the best thing about RIS is seeing people at such a happy place."

Attending RIS is also important for P38. From this 23-year-old female, she compares RIS to other Islamic conferences that she has been to in the United States. She finds RIS to be different to the other conferences that she has attended in the past because she found that RIS had a different worldview – that RIS has much more “brown” people who she is not used to seeing at other conferences. In her opinion, this may reflect Toronto’s diversity, especially within the Muslim community. She says:

It allows me to have a wider worldview on how Muslims look in the West just because it was pretty different than the conferences I have attended in America. Just the community seems very different as well. Not in a bad or good way, just different and I thought it was... I loved being there because it allowed me to experience that worldview and that kind of perspective. I feel like that is the vibe of Toronto as well. There were just so many brown people everywhere and I thought it was amazing whereas here, it's like... the city and the suburbs and in Toronto, it just felt like not even in the suburbs but there were brown people in the city as well (laughs).

At the same time, P34 explains that attending RIS gives her a feeling of “normal.” She shares her experience of being around other Muslims who share similar values with her:

I forgot how it is to feel normal like I belong and RIS gave me that.... Yeah, it felt so great to be in the company of people who have similar values, and I don't have to explain myself that I need to take a break to pray or I need to – why is my foot in the sink in the washroom? It felt so good.... I feel like just sitting in the lecture hall and hearing all these contemporary scholars talking about Islam in the previous times in the time of our Prophet SAW [Short for *sallallahu alayhi wa sallam* which translates to “peace be upon Him”] and connecting it to our day it's almost cathartic. I feel like being part of a legacy, I'm part of something bigger and that in itself, just being in the lecture hall and hearing these things feels really good.

Attending Reviving the Islamic Spirit for participants like P49, P38, and P34 is an essential part of their belonging and sense of community. They feel fulfilled by attending RIS, hence its significance in their lives. Participants had their own reasons and factors that contributed to their sense of belonging and community at RIS. It is the community of Muslims that participants find so welcoming and being able to explore different aspects of Islam that have them coming back to the convention every year.

4.3 Sense of Belonging and Community at RIS

The Muslim community in Canada and the United States is very diverse. There is no single Muslim community, but many different communities that are divided by ethnicity, culture, sectarianism, and other differences. Although some can be categorized under a single feature like the “Black Canadian or American” Muslim community or the “Pakistani” community, there are still divisions within these communities. Issues within Muslim communities can be labeled intra-religious since tensions are within the same overall religious community (Cummins 2021, Larsson 2016). For example, the “Black American” community can be divided into Ahmadi Black Muslims, Nation of

Islam, or Sunni Black Muslims. The “Pakistani” community can be affiliated with Twelver Shia Islam, Sevener Shia Islam, specific Sufi Muslims, and so on. The idea of *ummah* in Islam, which refers to the entire community of Muslims or the entire Muslim world, is still divided, dynamic, and everchanging. Because of the diversity of Muslims and because Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries struggle to define their religious identity, young Muslims seek to look for a sense of belonging and community. At times, Muslims can feel alienated because they may think that they do not belong with the dominant culture. Many times, Muslims have been othered in non-Muslim countries through misrepresentations on media and the spreading of misinformation about Islam and Muslims by politicians. These are not only causes of Islamophobia, but they also contribute to the feelings of lack of belonging and community. Apart from finding communities online, the participants in this study identified Reviving the Islamic Spirit as a place of belonging and community. For them, they could relate to other Muslims who attended the event. They would be surrounded by fellow believers in the three-day convention every year. This does not necessarily mean that young Muslims only attended RIS to spend time and interact with other Muslims but being in a Muslim environment when they are living in a non-Muslim country, this did play a role in their fascination with RIS. From P50, who is a 23-year-old female, said that RIS is something that she looks forward to even if she is not very involved with the Muslim community. By involvement, she may be referring to volunteering in Muslim events, spending time at the mosque, or any other interaction with the Muslim community where she lives. She feels like she belongs at RIS just like how she belongs at the mosque that she visits. The mosque is a religious institution while RIS is a convention that occurs annually. RIS does dedicate a space in their bazaar to hold congregational prayers, but it is not a formal place of

worship like a mosque. For P50, religion is a personal matter that she deals with daily, but with RIS she feels like she is a part of the diversity of Muslims there. She finds that RIS is a space where she can dress up, explore, and volunteer. She has these opportunities that she may not have outside of RIS. She mentions the desire to volunteer for a non-governmental organization at RIS. She says:

It kind of gives me, personally like something to look forward to even though I'm not as involved and I would say in the Muslim community. I feel like I am an everyday Muslim and everything is really personal but this kind of gives you again, a sense of belonging in a larger community rather than being oh just my personal mosque. You see a larger diversity in that. It made me look forward to; like I can dress up. I get to go explore. I wanted to volunteer for one of the NGOs, but some of them weren't taking volunteers. That is something that I look forward to.

Another participant, P15, who is a 24-year-old male, explains that RIS is where the Muslim community can highlight its initiatives. Like P50, he also says that RIS is a place where Muslims can come together as a larger community. He mentions how some people celebrate Christmas and usually spend the holidays with family. While many Muslims do not celebrate Christmas as a religious or cultural holiday, they can get together at RIS to spend time with the rest of the Muslim community. P15 says that this is also a good time to see what kinds of things the Muslim community have been working on, such as any businesses or startups. P15 states his thoughts on RIS as a place of belonging:

It's a very uplifting experience. I think the name of the convention, Reviving the Islamic Spirit really captures the affect it has on you very well. You get to see a lot of community there. You get to see community initiatives. It is also a place of gathering for the Muslim community, especially when... at a time when it is the winter holidays and moment where you see people of different backgrounds celebrating Christmas and other things. People getting together for that and having all kinds of gathering and parties, it is a nice time for the Muslim community as well to take advantage of the holidays to come together. It is something that I look forward to as a space where I can meet my friends who I haven't seen in a while even people who come from abroad for that conference. We don't get to

see each other very much at all but you know they will be coming to that conference, particular businesses that you get to see how they are developing and startups in the Muslim community.

Furthermore, P23 – a 28-year-old female – she cherishes the Muslim type of interaction that she gets at RIS. For example, she says that a woman had said *salam* (“peace” in Arabic) to her and she does not get to experience that type of interaction in her everyday life. The exchange of *salam* between Muslims is a religious greeting which is *as-salamu alykum*, which translates to “peace be upon you.” It is Muslim tradition to greet another Muslim with this saying. P23 points out that although she works with people with diverse backgrounds in the Science and Pharmaceutical industries, she cannot find connections with other Muslims because there are not many in her field of work. This has caused her to limit her Muslimness while at the workplace. She is mindful of using Islamic terminology at work such as *salam* and *alhamdulillah* (translating to “praise to be God). She says that sometimes she must stop herself from saying *salam* at work because it is a part of her that slips out, but many of her coworkers are not Muslims so they may not understand. This struggle to balance her Muslim identity and Muslimness in practice is heightened when she finds that many of her coworkers do not discuss faith. She says that people in her field of work place more belief on science than religion which causes her to put her Muslim identity in a corner. Her coworkers do not believe that science and religion can co-exist, so she is uncomfortable in expressing her Muslim self. This forces her to “conceal” her Muslim identity. This is not the case at RIS because there she is able to meet up with her Muslim friends and she can be herself wholeheartedly. She does not find the need to struggle with her Muslimness when she is around other Muslims at RIS. P23 explains:

I think when I walked in the atmosphere there it was just so nice. I just remember getting off the escalator and a woman said *salam* to me. It’s nice because you don’t have that in

your everyday life. Not that I have to conceal my Muslim identity but I work with mostly Caucasian people. Yes I work with people who come from different backgrounds specialty in the Pharma industry and the science Industry. You don't have a lot of people that connect with faith because they believe science completely and there is that duality that just does not exist. For me it was so nice from going everyday concealing that. My friends are like you say a lot of alhamdulillah and stuff like that but you don't say it to others, but I say it in my head. Like if I'm on a phone call I always have to catch myself at work like saying *salam*. I always have to stop myself so it's nice because that barrier wasn't there. Not barrier but that concealment wasn't there, and I feel like I could be myself. I was around people, and it was just nice a sense of belonging.

P16 is another participant who refers to RIS as a place of belonging and community. For this 31-year-old female, RIS is a place where Muslims can feel united as a community. She emphasizes that this is especially important for Muslims who live in societies where there are many cultural tensions. She says that despite Calgary having many Muslims, they are separated by their ethnicities rather than staying united as one Muslim community. She mentions ethnic groups that she has seen in Calgary like Pakistanis, Indians, Arabs, Somalis, and Asians who, in her opinion, do not make attempts to integrate into a unified Muslim community. She sees the opposite at RIS where people from all ethnic backgrounds come together as Muslims, and not specific groups like Pakistani-Muslims, Indian Muslims, Arab Muslims, etc. This is one of the reasons that she enjoys attending RIS and perceives RIS as a place of belonging and community.

I mean I think RIS is a gem and I'm sad that I found about it way late in life... I feel like it's been around a lot, and I just found out recently and I wish I found about it in university because it's such an important thing for a Muslim community to gather. You feel unity, important because you are not alone especially in cities like Calgary. We have a lot of Muslims, but they are pretty segregated like Pakistanis, Indians stay with themselves. Arabs stay with themselves, Somalis, Asians.... We are not so integrated here and to see a place like that where you see people from all over, all Muslims united is really important, I think. I feel like also social is very important and I feel like just to be aware of this information is important.

RIS is a place for connecting with other Muslims and make meaningful friendships as well.

P17 is a 19-year-old female, and she explains that she has made many friends at RIS that she still

keeps in touch with after many years. She says that she makes friends every year that she attends Reviving the Islamic Spirit, and she is able to find people that she has things in common with:

I guess it's to like – their motto is like revive the Islamic spirit... so that. It's nice to see people and listen to good stuff all day and I'm excited to make more friends because every single year when I've been volunteering, I meet really nice people and we still been in touch. I volunteered with someone in 2016 and I'm still in touch with her.... we still talk and friends that I made last year, we still talk. I'm excited to make more friends who are so likeminded. And it's nice to spend three days with them, just volunteering, talk about life. It's a really nice experience to meet new people.

P18 (a 30-year-old female) also mentions that she can find people that she has things in common with at RIS. P17 and P18 both bring up making meaningful friendships at RIS as an essential part of the convention. P18 explains that she can learn new things and meet people who think and have goals like her at RIS, and this is one of the reasons for her to attend RIS every year.

When I go to RIS, we are all on the same kind of mindset like going to Mecca. When you go to Mecca, everyone is on the same. You just want to worship God. But at RIS, I'm here to learn. I'm here to be with my people with like-mindedness... trying to do the same thing, trying to achieve the same goals. That's why I like RIS.

Almost all participants identified RIS as a place of belonging and community. They can experience being in a Muslim community and meeting other Muslims who have similar experiences as them – especially on the topic of living as Muslims in non-Muslim countries. Some of the participants live in Muslim neighbourhoods but they still do not experience the RIS environment where they are surrounded by Muslims, shop at a Muslim-themed marketplace, and listen to popular 'celebrity *imams*.' For those who do not come from Muslim neighbourhoods, they appreciate being around so many Muslims at this event. They get to feel the Muslimness that they do not experience on a regular basis. Some participants talked about

feeling alone or having to conceal their Muslim identities at work, while others discussed how important it was for them to make friends at Reviving the Islamic Spirit.

4.4 *Ijtihad*

When asked about how they practice Islam in their everyday lives, almost all the Reviving the Islamic Spirit participants mentioned the “five pillars” of mainstream Islam: expressing belief in the oneness of Allah, praying five times a day, giving to charity, fasting during Ramadan, and performing a pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, they also identified some additional ritual practices that shape their daily, lived piety. This included reciting a certain amount of *juz* (one of thirty sections that the Quran is divided into) every day, fasting every Monday and Thursday per sunnah, and sitting in a silent space and speaking directly to God as a form of meditation. These forms of lived Islam that they had adapted were through the concept of *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* commonly refers to independent reasoning which is a process of interpreting religious sources in traditional Islamic jurisprudence (Bunt 2018; Emon 2018; Patel 2022). This way of conducting religious research to conclude or to come to a judgment has been historically reserved for trained Islamic legal scholars. *Ijtihad* was to be done by a *mujtahid* (qualified jurist). The way religious research is practiced today can be considered a form of democratizing *ijtihad* and practicing digital piety. Increasingly, young Muslims who lack such classical training but do have access to digital materials that aid in reading and understanding Islamic legal concepts are claiming the right and responsibility to interpret tradition on their own. In this sense, Islamic authority is no longer reserved exclusively for trained clerics. For example, P19, a 24-year-old female, explains how she navigates the multiple religious information that is available to her to make informed decisions:

I do a combination. I guess now I can say as a Millennial, I do a combination of all. Imam Suhaib Webb, he's on Instagram and encourages a lot of questions, and he's amazing and responds back. I reach out to him on Instagram, I do research, and I try to use my own logic and reasoning sometimes, just based on what I've learned.

Instead of relying on one source like one *imam* or one website, she incorporates the multiple sources – an *imam*, social media, her own research that makes sense to her. This is her way of conducting *ijtihad*. This illustrates that the concept of *ijtihad* being tied to a *mujtahid* is no longer exclusive. The participants are considered ordinary individuals, and the easy access to the internet presents them with opportunities to conduct *ijtihad* on their own. In this study, participants were asked how they conducted research and how they verified the validity of the information that they found online. Most of them would take certain factors into consideration to weigh the authenticity of online materials and religious persons such as references to Quran, hadith, certain *madhab* (school of thought), religious leaders like Hamza Yusuf, Yasir Qadhi, and Omar Suleiman, and academic journal articles and books, among others. Although they acknowledged the significance of religious authority in examining online sources, they still felt like they could find answers to their questions without directly consulting with an authority figure. The internet had endless options for them when it came to finding Islamic information.

One of the main reasons the participants attended RIS was to interact with or see in-person 'celebrity *imams*'. These popular *imams* include people such as Hamza Yusuf, Yasir Qadhi, and Omar Suleiman. The participants noted that they followed these religious leaders on social media and would include them in their process of *ijtihad* when they would look for answers online. Their involvement in RIS influenced their digital piety. They were able to connect with the online Muslim world through interactions at RIS, which in turn played an important part in how they understood and practiced Islam in their everyday lives. If participants are not satisfied or

want to learn more, they can decide to interpret meaning for themselves by studying Islamic materials and practicing independent *ijtihad*. These online opportunities for lived religion provide young Muslims with opportunities to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of institutional religious authority.

For the participants, the internet had all the things that they needed to conduct their online religious research. All the participants in this study resided in Canada and the United States and emphasized the importance of having opportunities to go online if they have any religious questions. They were privileged enough to have access to the internet where they could search for religious matters. Rather than going to an *imam* at a mosque, they preferred to go online and read various Islamic resources and debates that would allow them to find a reasonable answer to their inquiry. Practicing *ijtihad* on their own online also allowed them to be anonymous in looking for certain Islamic debates or controversial topics that they may not feel comfortable discussing with an imam. For P15, a 24-year-old male, doing research on his own is a part of his process when he is looking for religious information. He explains:

I personally have this interest for research. I know many people don't have that and many people they don't have time or resources or background and experience in research so they will go directly to scholars and ask them questions. I think that probably is the most ideal way of doing it. Just being aware of all the different interpretations of scholarly stuff, even what you might consider a pretty straightforward issue but there are so many aspects to it that you don't realize when the question first comes up. So, I like to do my own research and that includes asking my parents, asking other adults that I trust that I have developed a trusting relationship with and a lot of online research, not on social media but academic papers, any books that I can find.

P15 lists his process of finding information which includes reading different interpretations of issues by multiple scholars, talking to his parents, other adults that he trusts, and then his own online research which includes looking at academic papers. He is performing *ijtihad* by examining

multiple sources and talking to people to arrive at a conclusion on an Islamic matter. Although not all his sources may be religious, as he emphasizes the importance of academic work as well. In his *ijtihad*, it is not only about religious sources, but also secular sources that may have different interpretations and perspectives than religious sources. P7, a 26-year-old female, also has her own process of doing research on her own. When asked what she does when she has a religious question, she said,

I'll talk to my mom first and see what she thinks. If she doesn't know, then I'll research, I'll read the Quran, I'll research what scholars are saying about it and then even the books – the hadiths... and if there's different opinions... like how there's grey areas in school of thoughts, one says "no" and the other says "yes," then I'll see what – that means you can either pick yes or no, and I'll decide whether – if yes fits the way of my life... then I'll see if it is necessary in my life, you know what I mean, do I really need to do this? Is it benefitting me in a positive way?

Her process of research also includes talking to one of her parents. She first relies on her mother for Islamic information in her quest to find answers. She then does her own research which includes reading the Quran and its *tafsir* (exegesis of the Quran). Her *ijtihad* includes reading multiple interpretations by different scholars just like P15. She will specifically look to see if there are any grey areas and what schools of thought say about a specific matter. How she arrives at a conclusion is by thinking about which answer would fit her lifestyle better. There may be multiple answers, but she will pick the answer that makes a positive impact in her life.

Some people may refer to her way of doing *ijtihad*, as "*fatwa shopping*." This is an informal term used within the Muslim community that refers to people who seek out Islamic legal rulings that benefit them, ignoring the other opinions and rulings on the same matter. For example, Sistani.org is the Shia equivalent of the Sunni IslamQ&A. Shia Islamic scholars allow Shia Muslims to get tattoos on their bodies. On Sistani.org, the question on the permissibility of

tattoos is answered with “tattoos are permissible, and they do not affect wudhu irrespective of whether they are permanent or temporary”¹¹⁰. While on IslamQ&A, that same question is answered with “tattoos are haram in all forms, whether they cause pain or not. Tattooing involves changing the creation of Allah. Prophet Muhammad cursed the one who does tattoos and the one for whom that is done”.¹¹¹ The two drastically different rulings on the same matter illustrate the differences within Islam. This is an example of a difference on ruling between two Muslim communities which are two different sects. However, issues like this exist within the same sect of Islam as well though they may not differ so drastically. An example of this is on the issue of celebrating Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. The Sunni community is divided on this matter. While the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa, issued a *fatwa* stating that Islam allows for the celebration of Muhammad’s birthday (also known as *mawlid al-nabawi*), other Sunni groups believe that it is prohibited because there is no mention of it in the Quran or any hadith. Gomaa has said, “commemorating the birth of the Prophet is legally based and commonly observed, as it is one of the matters which increases the love of our Prophet in the hearts of people, children and grandchildren.”¹¹² IslamQ&A’s *fatwa* on this is that “there is nothing in the Quran to say that we should celebrate the *mawlid al-nabi* or birthday of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). The Prophet himself did not do this or command anyone to do it, either during his lifetime or after his death”.¹¹³ According to the concept of “*fatwa* shopping,” an

¹¹⁰ Question 01336, Sistani Question & Answer, <https://www.sistani.org/english/qa/01336/>

¹¹¹ Question 20283, Islam Question & Answer, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/20283/are-tattoos-haram-in-islam>

¹¹² “Why Do Muslims Celebrate Mawlid Al-Nabawi?”, 2017.

¹¹³ Question 249, Islam Question & Answer, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/249/celebrating-mawlid-al-nabi-muhammads-birthday-allowed/>

individual picks whichever *fatwa* that they prefer based on the religious reasoning or which fits their lifestyle best like P7 would choose. She also goes on to say,

My mom has a lot of hadith books and English Quran translations as well so I'll look through that, and then online. The Quran is online with translations, so I'll look through there first just so I can see where I can find where in Quran and then I'll pick up the book and go through that, and then... say something related to dreams, we have dream books? As well, and then hadiths, different hadith books, from different writers that are credited and highly credited and... then I'll definitely YouTube scholars' opinions and stuff because there are scholars that talk about specific topics and I'll listen to their answers.

So, once she discusses the matter that she is interested in with her mother, she then turns to the physical books that her mother has. These are primary Islamic texts – Quran and hadith collections. She says that she read the Quran which has English translation, which she also finds online. This shows that she conducts her own research and has access to Islamic resources that are available in English. Her *ijtihad* process includes examining work from different Islamic scholars with different interpretations. She then confirms what she found in her research by looking at YouTube videos of scholars that she trusts. She takes all of this into consideration before arriving at a conclusion. Similarly, P22 a -21-year-old male- also looks at multiple Islamic sources before arriving at a conclusion. However, in his case, he pays attention to which schools of thoughts or *madhab* are presenting the *fatwa*. Although he does not adhere to any particular *madhab*, he does acknowledge looking at diverse *madhab* interpretations. He says:

Depends, if it's just a generic question that isn't sensitive to particular circumstances of time and place, I would look for an answer online particularly maybe in SeekersHub. I do *talfiq* (Incorporating multiple opinions from different *madhabs* to arrive at one conclusion for a matter) so I don't follow one particular *madhab*, but I follow two and I take positions from two. I take from the Hanafi *madhab* and the Zaidi *madhab*. So, in specific I take from these two. I look into SeekersHub for the Hanafi *madhab*, and there's another website, an Arabic website, for the Zaidi *madhab*.

Besides consideration specific *madhab* interpretations, he also adds SeekersHub into his process of seeking authentic Islamic information. SeekersHub – now known as SeekersGuidance – is an international Islamic seminary which operates both online and offline. It is also registered in the US as a non-profit organization. They have a popular YouTube channel, along with local Facebook pages like SeekersHub Toronto. P21's process of *ijtihad* includes looking at numerous sources of Islamic information – SeekersHub and websites of multiple *madhabs* to properly inform his Islamic answers. SeekersHub was also identified as a legitimate Islamic information website by P37 (a 23-year-old male). When he was asked about whether he goes online for Islamic information, he answered:

Sometimes I go just to see what is out there. Just to see what is going on because it is interesting to see what kinds of websites you get. I think actually there is one website, SeekersHub that I found to be really great for questions on religion by it is curated by actual scholars, not to say that other sites aren't. I don't know some of the sites I am like I have no way of telling who wrote this.

The reason that he gives for trusting SeekersHub is that it has Islamic information from “actual” religious scholars. SeekersHub was founded in 2008 by Shaykh Faraz Rabbani – who also frequents Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention. Some instructors at SeekersHub also attend RIS like Shaykh Yayhya Rhodus and Ustadh Amjad Tarsin. Having instructors who are invited speakers at RIS builds the trust that RIS attendees look for when it comes to getting authentic Islamic information. Therefore, P37 trusts SeekersHub over other Islamic websites. For this website, he knows who some of the scholars cited on there are, and it allows him to trust the information that finds on the website. This is part of his way of conducting *ijtihad*.

Conducting *ijtihad* on their own terms and having a different understanding of authority figures in Islam, the participants in this research illustrate that they are practicing piety in digital

spaces. This process of conducting *ijtihad* was both a digital and physical process, emphasizing its hybridity. Participants would look for religious information online, which they could verify with primary Islamic texts – Quran and hadith – which is then cross-checked with people that they trust like their parents, siblings, or *imams* from local mosques. This makes it a hybrid process because both virtual and physical spaces are used in the verification process. They have their own ways of being religious online and offline. Their religiousness online translates into their offline lives, while still maintaining a digital religious footprint. This means that they continue to follow certain religious leaders online on social media and would regularly conduct religious research online either for curiosity or for specific answers that they were seeking. In practicing their digital piety, they found ways to democratize *ijtihad*. For young Muslims in Canada and the United States, *ijtihad* is no longer reserved for trained Islamic scholars. Anyone with access to resources online can conduct *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* is for everyone.



Figure 6: Illustrating the cycle of *ijtihad* as identified by most of the participants.

4.5 Lived Islamic Practices and Beliefs

Jeldtoft (2011) uses lived religion in her research to show how Muslims practice Islam on a micro-level. She finds that her participants have 'reconfigured religious practices' or 'non-practice'. Her focus on 'non-organized' Muslims is how they have privatized, individualized Islamic or religious practices and how they consider them to be pragmatic. She defines 'non-practice' as:

A discourse and a (lack of) practice which is characterized 1) by the individual's self-definition as Muslim and belonging to a community that is taken to be Muslim in one way

or another, and 2) a minimal or non-performance of religious practices combined with a relatively strong awareness and notion that 'real' Islam is about practicing.¹¹⁴

According to Jeldtoft (2011), 'reconfigured religious practices' refers to "how Muslims reshape and reformulate religious practices in highly individualistic, inclusive, and pragmatic ways. They 'cut a heel and a toe' to make Islamic rituals make sense for them at a personal level."¹¹⁵ For the participants in my research, they too had some 'reconfigured religious practices' although they were not far off from the mainstream Islamic practices. This will be discussed below.

Participants' religious identity was tied with the ways that they practiced Islam and held personal beliefs on Islamic matters. Louise Ryan (2014) examined Islamic identity for young Muslims in the United Kingdom and identified that it is not homogeneous – religious identity means multiple things to young Muslims. Her findings on identity were divided into two parts:

- 1) Personal agency of freedom and choice
- 2) deviation from strict Islamic interpretations – how these are questioned.

Using these findings to compare them to the data that I found in my study, young Muslims have their own ways of constructing an Islamic identity. They use their personal agency and question religious authority to arrive at Islamic conclusions. When asked about how they practice Islam in their everyday lives, almost all the participants mentioned the "five pillars" of mainstream Islam: shahada- expressing belief in the oneness of Allah, *salah* - praying five times a day, zakat - giving to charity, fasting during Ramadan, and hajj - performing pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, they also identified some additional religious practices that shape their daily, lived piety. This included reciting a certain amount of *juz* every day, fasting every Monday

¹¹⁴ Page 1171.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

and Thursday as per sunnah, and sitting in a silent space and speaking directly to God as a form of meditation. The concept of Lived Religion allows us to account for the importance of these kinds of personal religious and spiritual practices that are often done outside of formal religious institutions—and beyond the influence of formal religious authority. For some participants, these additional religious practices were a form of their own personalized understanding of Islam. For example, P11 said:

I identify myself as a Muslim because I practice my religion. I pray. I find that there is a definition between some that [are] religious [and have] has their own interpretation and I find that interpretation is just between you and Allah and your closeness to Him. For example, I don't wear the headscarf, but I don't find that that explains your closeness to God so this is why I identify all of the Egyptian, Canadian, Muslim...

P11, who is a 33-year-old female who identified as “just Muslim”, doesn't believe that specific religious practices or dress define a person's religiosity. She states that she identifies as Muslim because she prays. Her connecting with God through prayer is a defining part of her being Muslim. She also explains that people have multiple interpretations when it comes to religion and this interpretation is a personal matter. However, one chooses to interpret meaning for religious matters, it defines the relationship between an individual and God. She goes on to say that she does not wear the hijab, yet this does not define her religiosity. The hijab is not a defining character for her for her Muslimness. She feels as if her praying and interpreting religious matters herself is what matters when it comes to her closeness with God. She also mentions that being Muslim is a part of her many identities. She does not reduce her identity to only her religious identity. This is important because it highlights the significance of intersectionality. She identifies with more than one identity which is being Muslim, Egyptian, and Canadian. P11 said all of this when she was asked about religious practices in her everyday life. While some participants chose

to answer questions related to religious practices in their everyday lives with listing the practices that they performed daily, for P11 her focus on her relationship with God as an individual was part of her everyday religion. Her lived religious practice included focusing on her relationship with God without the need for a religious person like an imam for guidance or to visit any religious institution like a mosque. Her everyday Islam did not require religious authority.

Similarly, P10, who 23-year-old female who also identified only as “just Muslim,” also did not emphasize any specific daily religious practices. In fact, she said that praying was difficult for her. She said:

I would say that would be one of my practices. Prayer – I'll be really honest with you; prayer is very hard for me. It's very hard for me. But I would practice it... I feel like practicing is not only through rituals but through the way you talk to people, the way you act, the way you think, the way you treat a human when you don't know that person, I think in that way I practice it as a Muslim.

While she does try to pray, her ways of being religious was by how she interacted with people. For her, the emphasis was on character and respect. She explained that she was practicing being Muslim by paying attention to how she spoke to people, how she thought about things, and how she treated others. This is similar to The Golden Rule which Ammerman (1991) discovered when researching Lived Religion among Christians. Her participants referred to the Golden Rule as “caring for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need”.¹¹⁶ For P10, prayer was a part of her life, but she was more concerned with her interactions with other people as a part of her piety. This was her everyday lived Islam. Just because she struggled with traditional prayers did not mean that she had to leave behind any aspects of her Islamic beliefs and practices. This is how P10 incorporated Islam into her daily

¹¹⁶ Page 203.

life. Islamic identity formation differs based on people's experiences and young Muslims present both a flexible and dynamic identity that they negotiate with every day. Their Islamic identity includes how they choose to practice Islam in their own personalized ways.

For P12, a 28-year-old female, although reading Rumi's poetry is not something that is considered a part of traditional Islam, for her it is a part of her way of understanding and connecting with Islam. Rumi helps her connect with her beliefs in Quran and hadith. When asked about how she practices Islam, she said:

Just like I listen to the Quran on my own on YouTube or whatever. I read Rumi quotes, and I go deeper into that, and I read the books. I look for books – I just found one called Gems of Islam, and it basically has the Quran, hadith, and Rumi, and it takes the most spiritual verses and things like that. I love reading things like that... quotes... anything I can reflect on.

P12's way of practicing Islam and finding spirituality through Rumi illustrates Lived Religion as how McGuire understands it. McGuire's (2008) work on Lived Religion emphasizes religion at the individual level. She argues that Lived Religion at the individual may have practices and rituals that are altered or fused together to make them more personalized, hence they should be considered an important way of studying religious practices. P12's mention of YouTube videos also emphasizes the role of the internet in her personalized ways of understanding and practicing Islam.

There is not a universal Islamic identity – Islam is practiced and understood in various ways which includes having 'reconfigured religious practices'. Most of Jeldtoft's (2011) participants did not refer to any primary Islamic texts. They did not talk about reading Quran, hadith, any discussions on fiqh, etc. They did not consider authority in Islam to be important but what was important to them was having a relationship with God on their own terms. Although

the participants in my study did have their own 'reconfigured religious practices', they incorporated primary religious texts. This is discussed in the next section.

4.6 "Cyber-Islamic Environments"

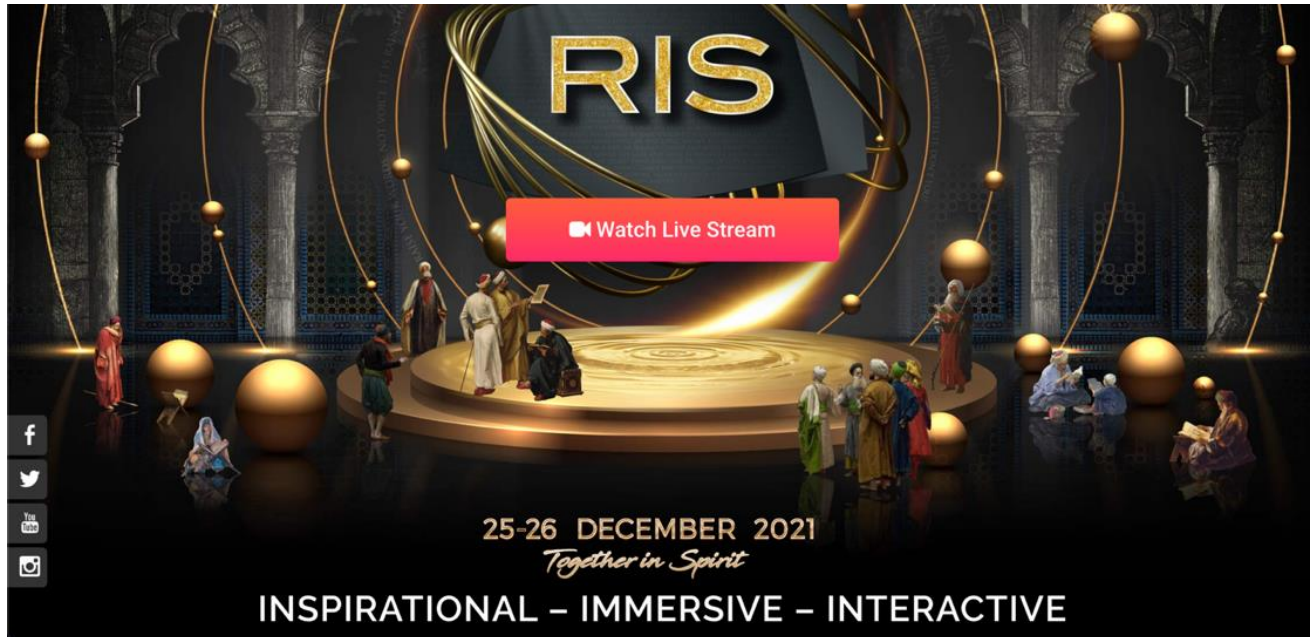


Figure 7: Screenshot from the RIS website taken in June 2022.

The findings in this research indicate that a lot of religious information and many popular religious authority figures are found online. Finding Islamic religious authority in online spaces is a norm in today's social media age. Besides religious authority individuals and educational institutions, mosques too use social media to be present online (van Tubergen, Cinjee, Meshikova, and Veldkamp 2021). Because the internet is used daily to access Islamic resources and communities, some Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have included digital literacy as a part of their curriculum – especially for young women (Hefner 2022). These matters around religious authority online, *imams* online, and doing religious research online can be all categorized under Gary Bunt's (2018) CIE – Cyber-Islamic Environments. He explains that:

I introduced the term cyber-Islamic environments (CIEs) as an umbrella concept, utilized to cover a range of online activities, whether an online thesis from an Islamic scholar or a tweet from a social media activist. The term Islamic is used to refer to any view that describes itself as belonging to Islam, even if that view is not universally shared by all Muslims. The term CIE itself has evolved in line with developments in technology and digital literacy.¹¹⁷

According to this understanding of CIEs, the participants use of the internet to access social media, *fatwa* Q&As, and explore religious authority and authenticity fits in perfectly with CIEs. *Imams* on social media are also part of CIE. In fact, I argue that the online media components of RIS could also be considered CIE. RIS is not exclusively online, but most of their promotion for the convention happens online. They have Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts dedicated to RIS and consistently post content related to the conference through the year. Every year, they post videos that include performances of entertainers who were at the prior conferences. The videos have background music which give it an emotional feel, in addition to having previous attendees tell the camera what they enjoyed at the conference. People who attend RIS are influenced by these online media promotions. Their tweets and posts are retweeted and shared many times. This all happens on "Muslim Twitter" or "Muslim Facebook." "Muslim Twitter" and "Muslim Facebook" are unofficial terms used to describe the parts of Twitter and Facebook in which Muslims take part to discuss things related to being Muslim. These parts of the Internet are included in CIE and therefor RIS is also a part of CIE. Furthermore, RIS has been held entirely virtual in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions. Because of the limitations on in-person gatherings to limit and stop the spread of COVID-19 globally, RIS was forced to turn into an online event in 2020. These restrictions were still in place the next year when vaccines against COVID-

¹¹⁷ Page 7.

19 were just being administered in Canada, the United States, and several other developed countries, so RIS was online again. I am writing this dissertation in early 2022, and RIS has not yet announced whether they will hold it online or offline this year. It could be assumed however, that it may be held as a hybrid event with both online and offline programmes. With RIS being online, many people who could not attend RIS in-person could attend it virtually. Having events online has many benefits since it gives access to those who cannot travel physically to these events. By being a part of CIE, RIS contributes to the Islamic discourse that takes place in online spaces – especially on religious authority.

4.7 Being Muslim in Canada and the US

Ryan (2014) explored what it meant to be a modern Muslim for her participants in the United Kingdom. For some young Muslims, it was about being Islamic – practicing Islam but at the same time blending into being British, in other words working with both Muslim and British identities. Michela Franceschelli and Margaret O'Brien (2015) researched on a similar issue where they found that young Muslims from South Asian backgrounds in the UK had three stages of negotiation when dealing with Islamic and British identities. They used dressing “modern and modest” as an example where modern referred to dressing according to British standards and modest stemmed from Islamic and family culture. Participants in my research could relate to these struggles as they pondered on what it meant to be Muslim in Canada and the US for them. They were asked what it meant for them to be Muslim in the Canada or the United States depending on where they lived. P18 (30-year-old female) said that she found it more difficult living in Canada as a Muslim than somewhere else in the Eastern world. She pointed out that while Muslims in Muslim-majority countries could hear the *athan* (Islamic call to prayer) recited,

Muslims in Canada did not. Having to take off time for religious holidays here in Canada rather than just having those days off in Muslim-majority country was also another example that she mentioned. She thought that these things made it harder to be Muslim. She recognizes the freedom that Canada allows her to have, such as freedom of religion and the ability to practice Islam however she liked, but she thought that this freedom was also a distraction from being able to practice her faith in Canada. She said that although she had many choices and freedoms in Canada, she was distracted by things that she would consider “bad.” She said:

I would say it is a lot tougher being Muslim. I guess compared to someone who is living out in the Middle East or the East. They have a lot easier time. You could hear the athan and stuff like that. Eid, you don't have to take off work. It is a lot more difficult being Muslim in the West and I see myself being distracted from stuff I need to do for myself. I do feel Canada has done a great job for me to express myself as whatever I want to be and didn't force myself to be one way to another. Didn't tell me be like us or... It gives choices, but I would say the more I have in terms of choice, the more bad choices I make...

While on one hand P18 reflects on her ability to make “bad” choices and difficulties that she is faced with by living as a Muslim in Canada, P34 (a 27-year-old female) considers herself privileged to be living as a Muslim in Canada. She appreciates the diversity that she sees in Scarborough – part of the Greater Toronto Area – and feels accepted into society as a Muslim. She appreciates the chances that she gets to express her Muslim identity that others may not in other Western parts of the world because of events like 9/11. She explains that she does, however, struggle sometimes with her Muslim identity but appreciates that it could be harder in other parts of the world. She also points out that she can participate in things that Canadians “normally” do such as snowboarding or any other outdoor activities. At the same time, she can also do things that other Muslims do like ‘make-up’ the prayers that she missed when she was

out when she returns home. At times, she can balance her Canadian and Muslim identities. She explains:

It means... At this time, it means that I am a very lucky, very privileged person because at times, like I said around the world people are struggling so much just based on their identity and I remember around 9/11 the conditions in Canada were also very difficult. People would – there was a lot of racism but at this time, especially in Scarborough because of the diversity, it's very accepting.... although I do have struggles with being a Muslim because of identity it's still not as bad as it could be and has been. So being a Canadian Muslim I feel like it's very privileged in the sense that I can experience the things that Canadians normally do. Like I go snowboarding, I do outdoor activities or anything most Canadians do, and I also come home and I pray and I make those prayers up and I fast just like every other Muslim. I think it means being very diverse and very versatile.

Muslims in Canada and the United States often discuss how they deal with their national and religious identities and whether they can integrate fully into society as Muslims. There have been many studies (Ahmed, 2009; Amin 2014; An-Na'im, 2014; Barzegar 2011; Beyer and Ramji 2013, Barras, Selby, and Beaman 2018) conducted on Canadian and American Muslims that speak to how they are forced to negotiate their Canadian/American Muslim identities. My MA research focused on young Muslims in the Toronto area who shared their experiences of being Muslim in Canada and found that many young Muslims search for a "third space"¹¹⁸ between being Muslim and being Canadian where they can be themselves.¹¹⁹ The participants in this current study did not feel as if they too had to find a "third space," but they did express their appreciation for, and the difficulties that arise from, being Muslim in non-Muslim majority countries like Canada and the United States. Similarly, in relation to belonging and being Muslim in Canada, participants did not abandon their Islamic identities because not only was it important to them in relation to

¹¹⁸ Bhabha, 2004.

¹¹⁹ Patel, 2016.

religious beliefs and practices, but also Islam was a value system for them. It was about how to live peacefully and respectfully with others. For example, P39 who is a 39-year-old female, said:

I think it's about who you are at your core. Are you a good authentic sincere person? And are you trying your best to be that and in your everyday life, are you trying to embody the values that Islam has told us are important? Are you someone who's like... I think if you're a lying, cheating person, and you're like still praying five times a day I don't think that that counts as Islam.

P39 shares what being Muslim means to her. She points out that it comes down to the values that Islam teaches. To her, being Muslim is not necessarily only about religious beliefs and rituals, but instead it is about bringing Islam to one's character. As explained earlier, this is similar to Ammerman's (1991) Golden Rule finding in Christian participants. Her interpretation of what it means to be Muslim illustrates the diversity of Muslims that exists in Canada and the United States. Being Muslim in relation to a religious identity is dynamic and can have multiple meanings depending on the individual. Participants in this study discussed its meanings, and every participant brought up the issue of Islamophobia that they are faced with every day. Both individual and systemic levels of Islamophobia were mentioned in the interviews, including its rise post-9/11. Given that the participants were part of the Millennial generation, they all experienced the aftermath of 9/11. 9/11 was a tragic event that occurred in the United States, but Muslims worldwide experienced the many impacts of it.

4.8 9/11 and Islamophobia

Before the participants were asked a specific question on anything Islamophobia-related, they had already mentioned related things like 9/11, anti-Muslim crimes, Trump's effect on Canada, and the rise of alt-right movements in Canada and the United States. Each participant was willing

to share their thoughts and experiences of Islamophobia because it shapes their Muslim identity and experiences of being Muslim in non-Muslim majority countries like Canada and the United States. Islamophobia is something that is unavoidable for Muslims worldwide but especially in the West for Muslims. In Chapter 1, I mentioned some of the Islamophobic hate crimes that impacted Muslims directly in Canada and the United States. This includes 9/11, the ban on immigration from Muslim countries during the Trump era, the Quebec Mosque shooting, and the London, Ontario, attacks in Canada. Muslims have always been vilified and 'othered' by non-Muslims. This goes back to the time of Prophet Mohammed when Muslims faced brutality from other tribes in Mecca and it continues to today. During the times of the Byzantine and Umayyad Empires, Islam was depicted as a "pagan cult" that threatened the non-Muslim world.¹²⁰ In the late 13th century Christian scholars in Europe regarded Islam as "evil" and "absolutely alien to God."¹²¹ Today, more specifically, contemporary media has played a large role in othering Muslims through an Orientalist perspective in movies, TV shows, and news (Saeed 2007, Terman 2017). At the governmental level, Islamophobia occurs when governments and institutions in power create and uphold legislation and policies that discriminate against Muslims. At the local and personal level, Islamophobia occurs at the workplace, school, and public places in everyday life. It is certain that the term "Islamophobia" refers to the negativity that surrounds the experiences and perceptions of Muslims as people and Islam as a religion. The term "Islamophobia" comes from the 1997 Runnymede Trust Report which defined it as the "the dread

¹²⁰ Iqbal. 2010. "Islamophobia or Islamophobias: Towards Developing a Process Model".

¹²¹ Iqbal, 2010.

or hatred of Islam” and “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.”¹²² Zafar Iqbal explains that Islamophobia:

“is the negative posturing to Islam and Muslims; it mainly refers to prejudice, threat perceptions and racism and is independent of each other or otherwise, where prejudice may be characterized as ‘othering’; threat perceptions may have four sub-dimensions, namely symbolic threat (or sociocultural threats), security threats, realistic threats (either as political or economic threats or both), civilization threat (in clash of civilization perspective) and racism with two possible sub-dimensions, that is, religious and cultural”.¹²³

Iqbal points out that the definitions of Islamophobia are not clearly defined although many definitions take into consideration the emotional and psychological propensities that people have against Islam, and therefore Muslims.

Discourse on the othering and alienation of Muslims comes from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). In this work, he illustrated how the West viewed Muslim-majority states in the East, or “the Orient,” as “the other” and pointed out that this notion of othering Muslims and perceiving them as threatening and foreign goes back to the time of the Crusades. Todd Green (2019) lists eight features of Islamophobia as identified by the Runnymede Report which represent commonality in the multiple definitions of “Islamophobia.” These are:

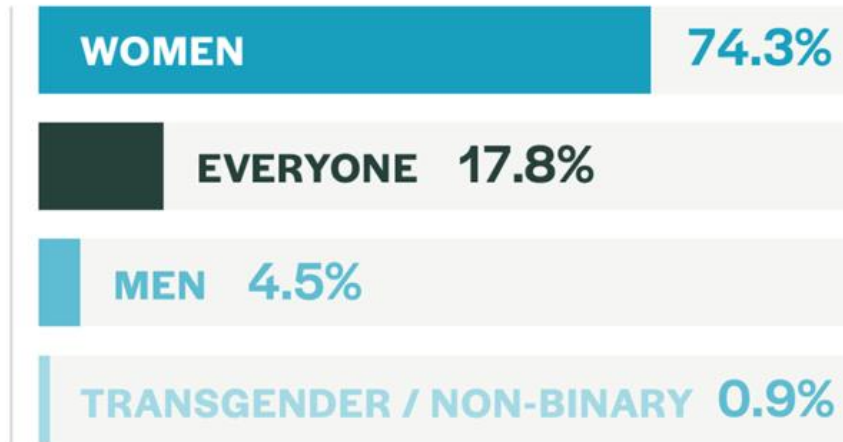
- 1) Islam as monolithic and static
- 2) Islam as separate and other
- 3) Islam as inferior
- 4) Islam as the enemy
- 5) Islam as manipulative
- 6) Justification of racial discrimination against Muslim
- 7) Invalidity of Muslim criticism of the West and
- 8) Anti-Muslim discourse as natural.

¹²² University of California, Berkeley. “Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project”. <https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/research/islamophobia-research-documentation-project/>

¹²³ Iqbal, 2010. “Islamophobia or Islamophobias: Towards Developing a Process Model”.

Out of the 50 participants in my study, 33 identified as being female. Stories of gendered Islamophobia were shared by participants. This type of Islamophobia specifically discriminates against Muslims based on their gender in relation to stereotypes of Muslims. Visible Muslims get discriminated against and are victims of anti-Muslim crimes because of their gender and how they look – Muslim women who wear the hijab or Muslim men who have long facial hair and/or wear a *topi*. According to some studies, Muslim women are more likely to be victims of Islamophobia than Muslim men. The following graph shows the results of a survey conducted by the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley. This survey, entitled, “Islamophobia through the Eyes of Muslims,” was completed by American Muslims in 2020 with a total of 1,123 participants. It shows that the highest group who are considered most at risk of experiencing Islamophobia are women at 74.3%.

Groups that are more at risk of experiencing Islamophobia



"Groups that are most at risk of experiencing Islamophobia" Graphic courtesy Othering & Belonging Institute

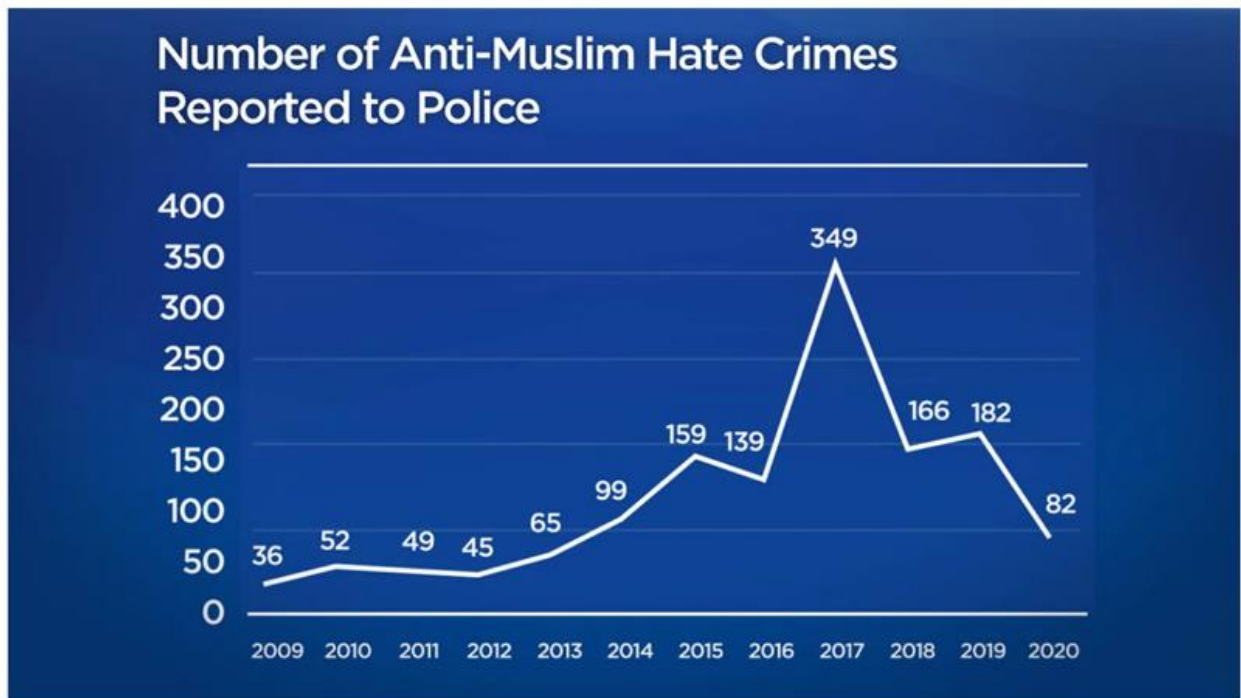
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Figure 8 showing that women are more at risk of experiencing Islamophobia.

Furthermore, according to Statistic Canada's report, "Police-reported hate crime in Canada, 2018," 47% of victims of violent crimes in the Muslim population were women or girls.¹²⁵ This percentage would be higher if more hate crimes were reported to the police. See the graph below that shows how many anti-Muslim crimes were reported to the police between 2009 to 2020.

¹²⁴ Molina. 2021. "Muslim Women More Likely than Men to Experience Islamophobia, Survey Finds."

¹²⁵ "Police Reported Hate Crime in Canada 2019." 2019.



© Global News

Source: Statistics Canada

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Figure 9: Illustrating rise in hate crimes against Muslims.

In addition to this, the Manitoba Islamic Association conducted a survey in 2022 with over 190 participants. They found that 62% of the participants experienced Islamophobia and 73% of them were women. From all their participants, only 18% felt safe in public wearing clothes that identified them as Muslim.¹²⁷ While the European Network Against Racism reports that women in France face multiple types of Islamophobia: Islamophobia in the workplace, Islamophobic violence and speech, and several levels of discrimination against Muslim women because of both their religion and gender.¹²⁸ In the US, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) reported that

¹²⁶ "Since 9/11, Islamophobia Has Been 'a Constant Feature' in Canada, Experts Say - National." 2021.

¹²⁷ "Community Experiences with Islamophobia", 2022.

¹²⁸ "Forgotten Women: The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Women in France", 2016.

Muslim women who wear the hijab are more likely to face discrimination than those who do not¹²⁹. They reported that, "69% of women who wore hijab reported at least one incident of discrimination compared to 29% of women who did not wear hijab"¹³⁰. The ACLU reported that Muslim women who wear the hijab are more likely to face discrimination than those who do not¹³¹. They reported that, "69% of women who wore hijab reported at least one incident of discrimination compared to 29% of women who did not wear hijab"¹³². The significance of pointing out the high likelihood of Muslim women experiencing Islamophobia is that some women have found ways to practice Islam in their own ways which are not as public as wearing the hijab outdoors. Muslim women are identified as Muslim because they are visibly Muslim.

However, some Muslim women no longer wear the hijab for personal reasons and have found other ways to replace that loss of religiosity. Because of Islamophobia, some women have also questioned how important it is for them to wear the hijab. These other ways of being religious and practicing Islam are through lived Islam.

P21 shared her experience of when 9/11 happened and how it affected her family on a personal level. After 9/11, her family's religion became public. Before that, people only considered their Indian ethnicity:

When 9/11 happened, I was in 4th grade and I remember we lived in Germany at that time on a small army base. Up until that point, we were the token Indian family on base and after that, we became the Muslim family. It was interesting because we were very involved with the other kids and families like soldiers and everything. My mom was a girl scout leader, soccer, all the other after-school activities and stuff like that we were really involved and doing well in school. There was so much friendship and acceptance up until

¹²⁹ American Civil Liberties Union, "Discrimination against Muslim women – fact sheet".

¹³⁰ American Civil Liberties Union, "Discrimination against Muslim women – fact sheet".

¹³¹ American Civil Liberties Union, "Discrimination against Muslim women – fact sheet".

¹³² American Civil Liberties Union, "Discrimination against Muslim women – fact sheet".

that point, after that moment we were looked upon with suspicion even some of our closest friends which was hard because we had nothing to do with it.

She continues to say that because of 9/11, her family felt alienated by those who were once their friends and who “accepted” them before. Another crucial thing about this time was that P21 had just started to wear the hijab, and she felt like she was being treated differently because of it. Her family then moved back to the United States, and she felt discriminated there as well. She recounts that once at school, a young boy had pulled off her hijab and she felt that it was an example of Islamophobia.

It was like all of a sudden everything had changed in terms of perception and relationships. That was difficult and like I said, right around that time I had started to wear the hijab. It was kind of another pickle people had to treat me different and then we had moved back to the US, we had moved to Texas. There were a lot of different encounters and moments that I felt we were discriminated against. For example, my hijab was pulled off once in school, but I think that was discrimination because of Islamophobia. I think that was because a boy had dared someone to pull off my hijab.

Similarly, P23 (a 28-year-old female) too felt othered whenever she would be told that she is “normal” because she does not wear the hijab. She says:

I think like a perception of me. They think... Not a good girl but because I don't wear hijab, it is easy for me to not to stick out. Have I felt people feel a certain way? Probably. Some people think that I... Like when I mentioned that I am Muslim they think that Muslims are an angry bunch. Sometimes when I share that part of me, people are like... I think people think that I am less cool than I am (laughs). They're like oh you are so normal! Like someone will say something like that and I will be like yeah.... In my head I get offended. I see that a lot with Caucasian or white people (laughs). And they're like you're so normal! I'm like, “yeah. I'm a normal person.” It's one aspect of me. It's a funny aspect because they think you were normal but like I am still normal even as a Muslim.

P28 puts her Muslim identity in the background to avoid any Islamophobia. When asked if she had experienced any challenges or prejudice because she is Muslim, she said that:

It was like that 4-5 years ago. It is probably the same still, not as much but I didn't feel safe to wear hijab or tell my friends. Also, my parents had responsibility so if you are in a country like that and you are giving da'wa, then you just need to be a presentable Muslim. You're supposed to not show them how you pray, show them how kind you are.

P22 – a 21-year-old male – tells a story where he and his friend were called “terrorists” when they were sitting in a *mussallah*. A *mussallah* is a space that is used for prayer, usually in a mosque. The stereotype of Muslim men as being violent, and supporters of terrorism often comes from media like journalism and Hollywood movies and TV shows. Public opinion is shaped by what people see in the media and this can be referred to as the mediatization of religion.

One thing that was memorable one time my very good friend and I were just sitting around next to the mussallah in the university, and a man passed by, he looked into the mussallah, and he was on the phone and said, “oh there's nothing here it's just a bunch of terrorists – it's a terrorist spot.” And we confronted him. He was wearing military – he looked like a veteran – but a young vet, he looked 35 or something. Anyways we confronted him, and it almost turned into a fight. But he ended up leaving, no fight occurred, it was just like a stand-off. Yeah, all we told him was, “hey watch your mouth.” We didn't offend him or act particularly aggressive because we looked particularly Muslim. We both had facial hair or whatever.

Islamophobia can also manifest in subtle and minor forms as well. Islamophobia on a micro-level is something that Muslims are aware of. P12 shared her reasoning for wearing a hijab. She says that one of the reasons that she chose to wear the hijab is so she can educate others about it. She does not wear the hijab as a reflection of her religiosity. Although she explains that she lives in California where there is a large Muslim community, she still feels some animosity from others. She thinks that it may have something to do with her being a visible Muslim woman. She says that:

Honestly like I feel a lot about islamophobia like people were not nice to Muslims. It might just be where I'm from. In California, there's plenty of Muslims. Once in a while I feel like some people look at you different. But that's one of the reasons why I wear the hijab. Like I don't wear the hijab because I think I'm going to go to Hell if I don't cover my hair. One

of the reasons why I wear it is because I get to educate people. Having said that I think there's some people who are hesitant to approach me, or who don't know how to act around me. Especially young guys... like should we talk to her... but once they get to know me it's pretty okay. I haven't had anyone be super mean around me.

Furthermore, P32, who is a 28-year-old female, also pointed out how subtle Islamophobia can be. She explained that people would often assume that she was immigrant rather someone who was born in Canada because of her visibility as a Muslim woman. She thinks that Islamophobia in this sense manifests in illusive ways. It is not direct but the assumptions about her identity and questions about her ethnic or immigrant background come off as Islamophobic. Can visibly Muslim woman be born in Canada? Did they obtain their educational background from Canada? Or could they possibly speak English fluently?

It's so hard because it is so subtle. Overtly verbal comments... I went to school downtown so people saying go back home and things like that, those were very common. I think other than those subtle ways... I am a nurse. I work in the hospital, and I will have patients for example, how are you liking the winter so far? It's like did you go to school here (laughs)? the assumption is right away or oh, your English sounds perfect (laughs). Those kinds of comments.

She also expressed her dissatisfaction of experiencing Islamophobia on a micro-level because it is difficult to show that the real cause behind discrimination was Islamophobia itself. This is one of the challenges of Islamophobia that is not direct but Muslims are aware of because of the history of anti-Muslim sentiments in the West like negative portrayals of Muslims in popular media and bills like Bill S-7 in Canada and Bill 60 in Quebec (as discussed in Chapter 1). P32 talked about the discrimination that she faced in the workplace. She felt discriminated because she was not being given opportunities at work like other co-workers although she too had the qualifications like them. She feels as if she has to work harder and to "prove" herself at work because she is visibly Muslim unlike the people that she works with. She explained:

I think that the other thing as well is opportunities professionally are not handed to you here. I won't say handed because you have to earn them, but I think they are not given even when it is time. Even when it is time for me to go to this training... other people are getting picked but I am not. It is very hard to prove as well. I recently faced this whole thing with my previous manager.... It was hard for me to prove that it was based on who I was, but other people were being supported (laughs). This has never been an issue before. It is very hard to prove even when I went to diversity mediation, she told me, "Well, there is nothing to prove this." This is the issue with it. Of course, anyone can make a claim it is based on who you are but you're in the situation, you can sense because you see how others are being treated and you have the qualifications, you have all of that, but you don't receive that support. I think that subtle ways in professional environment you get that. It is more about access to further training. You have to fight for it. You have to prove yourself when other people don't necessarily have to do the same thing.

Muslim women who are visibly Muslim because they wear religious symbols like the hijab or niqab often feel like they are viewed as someone who represents Islam as a whole. Their individual religiosity is taken away from them and they must be aware of every small thing that they do because it will be judged as if they represent the entire Muslim community. P32 said that she is not "allowed to be an individual." This is a result of indirect Islamophobia because visible Muslims cannot express themselves as they please. They have to put their Muslimness aside as secondary. P32 also said:

I think there is this added pressure that you are being on your best behavior always. You are not allowed to be an individual (laughs). You can't have a bad day. Everything is going to be judged to that (laughs).

P32 finding this humorous illustrates the awkwardness that Muslims are faced with for being Muslim. According to her, they cannot solely be an individual because they are visibly Muslim. Everything that they do or say will be traced back to their Muslim identity. So, why is this important for this study? Experiences of Islamophobia and the Muslim identities of these participants brought them to the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention. Again, as stated above, RIS offers a feeling of belonging and community that many other places in Canada and the United

States do not offer to the participants. They do not have to worry about experiencing Islamophobia at RIS because it is a very “Muslim” environment for them. This is not to say that there are no instances of intra-Muslim conflicts, but Muslim women feel safe being visibly Muslim at a space like RIS. In this ‘convergent space’, RIS creates a safe space for Muslims.

4.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed my research findings related to personal ways of conducting religious research, significance of Reviving the Islamic Spirit for all of the participants, ways in which Islam is lived and practiced, and encounters of Islamophobia for the participants. First, I discussed what *ijtihad* meant and how it was used by the participants for religious reasons. That discussion was around how authority and authenticity were understood by the participants, who they considered to be religious authority, and how Islam was individualized by them. Second, this chapter also focused on RIS and how specific understandings of lived Islam translates to attending RIS for participants, and how it appeared to be a place of belonging and community for them. Finally, I discussed some instances of Islamophobia that the participants highlighted and what it meant for them to live as Muslims in Canada and the United States. These were the main findings of my research, along with specific meanings of authority and authenticity, which are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: Authenticity and Authority Online

If I can find an answer from a scholar that say, in a video format or something like that then I might trust that a little bit more, like a scholar from Reviving the Islamic Spirit or something like that because I know some have blog posts and I wouldn't trust that as much if it is from a random website. (P42)

Sometimes it's hard. Be it a forum and something like that. First, you have to look at the website. A lot of the times there is a Sunni site or a Shia site, but like even then a lot of the times even in forums, there are references you can look at the bottom and you find out if it is legit or not. A lot of the times people just give their opinion if you read it, you will know it is their opinion. (P6)

That's the hard thing. I like never really know who is putting what on the internet. It can be very questionable. So, I guess I would look to known scholar who are known bodies that are respected in North America? So, Yaqeen Institute is one. The Islamic Institute of Toronto has like resident scholars who sometimes answer questions. I might look for them. There's like scholarly bodies like Canadian Council of Imams... North America, those kinds of like respected reputable bodies are the ones I would look to. I wouldn't just like go into the depths of the internet to try and find someone who articulates an opinion. People can misreport things that other people have said, they can take hadith out of context. I find that there are a lot of very strange people who do that, and they're respected in community, which is quite shocking. (P39)

Who would I go to? You know what I do? If I am looking for something, I will go on YouTube and I will search specific people or I will ask my dad.... My dad is really religious, and he reads a lot of books, I will look into that and the books that I purchased from Reviving the Islamic Spirit... I don't know how to explain it. To be completely honest, idk if they are 100% valid. That is the truth and I don't know if I will ever know but I do my best. (P43)

The massive volume of religious information online informs the participants' religious identities and understandings of Islam in unprecedented ways. Amid the multiplicity of websites like IslamQ&A, social media interactions with 'celebrity *imams*', and the constant stream of materials found on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, many young Muslims seek to create their own ways of practicing Islam and formulate religious identity. This includes conducting religious research online and navigating among the limitless information found in online spaces. How do Muslim Millennials inform their decisions on authenticity? How do they differentiate between authentic

versus unauthentic religious information on the internet? These are some questions that participants in this study discussed. As can be seen above, P42 and P06 explain how they identify trustable religious sources. I found similar findings in my MA research on the construction of religious identity among young South Asian Muslims in Toronto, in that they also turned to the internet for religious answers. I interviewed Imam Dr. Patel in 2015, and he said, “most masjids give them (young adults) general education.... but now they have “Mufti Google.” Now they have access to this, and they can even find *imams* online.¹³³ While it is true that having unlimited access to religious resources on the internet is beneficial for many young Muslims, the unprecedented volume of information also presents doubts and tensions on authenticity. P14, a 24-year-old female, explained that she was concerned about the authenticity of Islamic information available online. She was worried about her younger cousin who could easily be influenced by religious information that easily spread online. She said:

I was talking to my brother-in-law recently because my younger cousin, he is in grade 12 now and he is going through this phase now. He's super close to the *deen* and being a better Muslim. I was telling my brother-in-law 'Can you have a talk with him and make sure he is going on proper links? Looking at proper scholars?' Not just social media scholars like Shaykh Twitters or IG. They go viral. Their videos go viral and my cousin of mine, he reposts it and shares it with us. I look at it and I'm like 'can you make sure he doesn't take everything in'. He is in a very sensitive age and not just believe everything as it is. So that's worrisome even for me when I was his age, I probably wasn't thinking of those things like is this credible? Is this right or proper? Actual source? We need to be careful.

Participants were also asked how they find trustable and credible sources. When asked about the reliability of sources, P02, a 21-year-old female, said:

Usually something that's authentic is verified like it's more clean and put-together where something like a propaganda website or something that feels like from someone's end, it's so corny. There's clearly... undertones that you can tell when you come across that...

¹³³ Patel, 2016.

She examines the overall aesthetic of the webpages that she visits. Something that is authentic and reliable according to her would look “more clean.” Some websites like propaganda websites, P02 explained, are filled with many images, videos, are unorganized, and look unprofessional. Websites that are organized well and have a professional look, would be something that she could trust. She can differentiate between reliable and unreliable websites by their looks and their “undertones.” I interpret the “undertones” that she is referring to are bias that you may be able to spot on websites. On one hand, some websites that provide Islamic information provide fatwa and sources that are neutral or use multiple different sources. On the other hand, some websites will upload Islamic information that will only support the website’s political or religious goals. One way to spot whether a website is catering to a specific website is to look at the “about” section. From here, one can examine who is running a website, what kinds of organizations are involved (if any), and whether a website affiliates with a specific sect.

For P41, references to the Quran or sunnah are essential for their authenticity. Any Islamic information online that is backed up by primary Islamic texts are acceptable for this 24-year-old female. She explains that she must filter through large amounts of information that she comes across online before she can find a reliable source. Forums and opinions are not concrete sources for her so she must first skim those webpages. She will then find herself on a website that answers her questions and support it with the Quran or sunnah. She says that,

So, obviously I type in my question and then I won't take anything like anything that they are saying if I don't see textual proof or reference because they are not referencing an *ayah* [verse from the Quran], *surah* or sunnah or whatever. I won't take that. I will just swift through, and you have to swift through a lot because there are lots of forums and stuff and people. It's hard to differentiate what is right or not, but yeah, I look for the textual proof. I will look for *ayah* and whatnot.

Primary Islamic texts are also important for P47. P47 is a 30-year-old male who uses IslamQ&A regularly. He prefers this specific website because it primarily uses hadith, and that makes it reliable for him. He specifically prefers answers to questions to come from Sahih Bukhari or Sahih Muslim. These are two hadith sources which are widely circulated and trusted in the Muslim community – and more specifically, by Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims also use Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, but Twelver Shias most commonly refer to other hadith collections such as *Kitab al-Kafi*, which is not popular amongst Sunni Muslims. Although P47 identifies as “just Muslim,” his authentication for Islamic sources refer to Sunni hadith collections which help him clear his doubts. He says:

...IslamQA is my go-to source for hadith to clear my doubts, as well as I always try to see if it is mentioned in Sahih Bukhari or Sahih Muslim.... From the hadith, from the major scholars so I have seen and attended so many gatherings in India also. I have seen depending upon on which sect you belong to, you can be very much emotional, or you can be much sensitive at the time of giving the speech but at the same time, you are giving wrong information to the ummah. There are so many fabricated stories related to when Prophet Muhammad was ascended to *miraj*, the night of *miraj*. There were so many fabricated stories and so many fabricated stories of *shabbe barat* (Islamic festival where some Muslims believe that God forgives all sins) that was the last month. I just try to see whether it is fabricated or not, whether it is from reliable source. So that is how I try to do that.

He is also critical of religious leaders who side with one specific sect in Islam or tend to give “wrong information” to Muslims when they are emotional or sensitive. P47 is referring to emotionally charged sermons that may not be authentic according to his views on authenticity. If they do not refer to specific hadith collections, then he believes that the information that they are relaying is inaccurate. He shows concern for false information when it comes to Prophet Muhammad and stories in relation to the *miraj*. The majority, if not all, Muslims believe that the *miraj* is when Muhammed ascended into the heavens. During this night, he met the archangels

Gabriel or Jibril and Michael or Mikal along with other prophets including Adam, Jesus, Joseph, Moses, Abraham, and more. In this journey, he travels from Mecca to Jerusalem by a mythical creature, *buraq*, then to heaven by Gabriel. It is believed that *salat* was given to Muhammad on this night as a gift from God.¹³⁴ There are details about this story that may be altered, fabricated, or exaggerated which is why P47 believes that some religious leaders may not be preaching the right facts about this. Again, if it is supported by any hadith, then it is a reliable and trustable source for P47. In "Fatwa Online: Novel Patterns of Production and Consumption" (2016), Marcotte analyzed websites such as IslamOnline.net, which was created in 1999 that has *fatawa* such as on the coexistence of Muslims and Jews, and the reconstructive hymen surgery for Muslim women. She shows that Muslims are seeking out information related to these topics both in the West and in Muslim-majority countries and have found the internet as the space to seek such information. The latter of the two examples showcases the contradiction that sometimes may arise in *fatawa* and how Muslims approach similar situations. The contradiction refers to some *fatawa* allowing hymen surgery for reconstructive purposes, while other *fatawa* that do not. A woman on the Muslim Village forum shared a *fatwa* regarding reconstructive surgery, where Saudi Salafi clerics claimed it to be forbidden, and at the same time, she shared another *fatwa* where the Grand Mufti declared that it was allowed, and the information did not have to be shared with a future spouse.¹³⁵ In this case, the woman takes the *fatawa* and forms an opinion for herself which results in a personal

¹³⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Miraj-Islam>.

¹³⁵ Page 238.

Marcotte explains that this online *fatwa* market is where individuals take rulings into their own hands and decide where to go with that.¹³⁶ This is like what I found with the participants in this study. Participants studied the topic at hand and sought answers to the questions that they had by watching YouTube videos of well-known Islamic religious leaders, and they also visited *fatawa* websites like IslamQ&A.

Earlier in chapter 2, Hoover's (2016) discussion of authority was mentioned. He explained that Weber argues that authority was legitimate when it is "perceived to be plausible, valid, and (to an extent) authentic."¹³⁷ This validation is what allowed 'celebrity *imams*' to exist and considered trustable. For almost everyone who participated in my study, accessibility and the preaching styles of 'celebrity *imams*' in both online and offline spaces were crucially important factors to consider them legitimate religious authority figures. The participants expressed that they sometimes have a difficult time with religious authority figures which makes them turn to online spaces to discover other sources of religious information like fatwa websites. The concept of Lived Religion is relevant in understanding that Muslim Millennials in this study have a diverse approach to religious authority and authenticity. The above examples of P02, P41, and P47 illustrate this very clearly. They will fact-check religious leaders whether through online or offline research to make sure that they are referring to reliable sources like the Quran and specific hadith collections.

P47 had mentioned IslamQ&A, as did many others. The photo below (figure 10) is a screenshot of IslamQ&A's homepage. Islam Question & Answer, also known as IslamQ&A, is a

¹³⁶ Page 237.

¹³⁷ Page 20.

website that stores *fatawa* on Islamic matters that have been asked before. They archive older questions that have been answered and continue to answer people's questions. The screenshot shows how the website is designed. It first shows new questions that have been answered. Typically, people ask questions on Islamic matters and someone from the IslamQ&A team would answer it with references to the Quran, sunnah, previous legal rulings, and advise based on that. As you can see on their homepage, new answers show up first and the topics of those questions are diverse. Here, someone has asked how to do *ghusl* (ablution or full body purification) while wearing a wig. Another asked if it was possible to "stop sinning out of love for someone." Another question is about consulting psychologist or psychiatrists for Muslims. On the right side of the homepage, it states that it is the month of *Shabaan* (8th month of the Islamic lunar calendar). The questions underneath that are related to this month. These questions are about fasting, deaths, prayer, and celebration of the 15th night of *Shabaan* (which some Muslims consider an un-Islamic innovation).

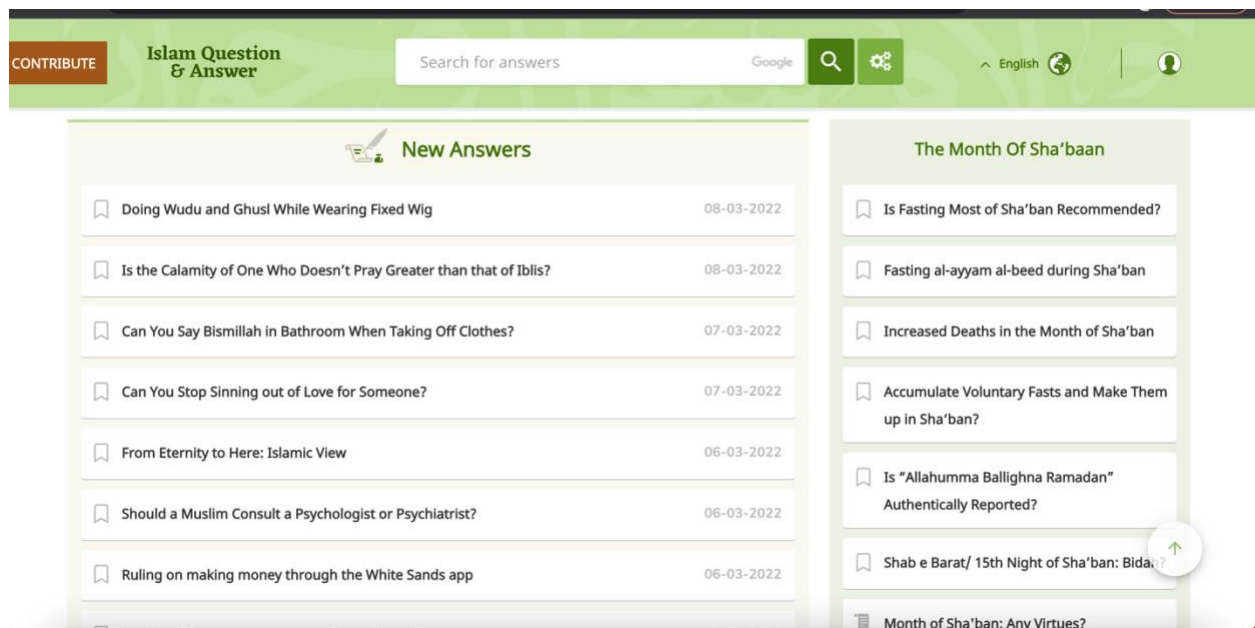


Figure 10: Screenshot of the IslamQ&A homepage taken March 8, 2022.

IslamQ&A and other similar websites work in a similar manner as the Orthodox Jewish websites that Tsuria (2010) studied, and both faiths employ a more traditional approach to sexuality. Rather than going to the local mosque to ask a religious question to the imam, the participants increasingly opt to simply go online. There they have access to multiple trained scholars through websites and social media accounts, as well as a wide range of self-styled Islamic 'experts' who can answer their inquiries. The latter are Islamic influences who are popular on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. These influencers may not have any traditional Islamic training, but they have enough knowledge to attract thousands of followers and receive verification from Twitter. Although no specific influencers were mentioned, participants did name specific This thesis focuses on how Muslim Millennials in Canada and the United States navigate identities and research information about religion online. Their participation at Reviving the Islamic Spirit conference in Toronto plays a role in their search for religious authority and for religious community. The search for religious authority is an important consideration in thinking about its role in online sources and at events like RIS.

Zaman (2008) argues that traditional Islamic education cannot be replaced by the Internet – referring to the easy access to the internet by ordinary Muslims who can research Islamic matters without having a traditional Islamic education. However, this discussion is not whether Muslims will consider the internet to be more authentic than a religious leader with Islamic education, but rather, if Muslims are more inclined to go onto the Internet for religious matters instead of a religious leader. The data from this doctoral research project shows that Muslims go onto the internet for such matters to verify information. They go online to see what other viewpoints there are on a certain matter, and if they are backed-up by primary religious sources

like the Quran or Hadith. Most of the participants did not question the reliability or authenticity of religious leaders due to their traditional Islamic background. Their concern was not on where an *imam* got their Islamic education, instead they were pleased to have the option of going online to research their Islamic concerns. They still valued religious leaders, which is why they continued to follow them on social media platforms and watch their videos on sites like YouTube or take online courses lead by religious leaders, such as those from the Yaqeen Institute (founded by Omar Suleiman) or the al-Maghrib Institute (founded by Yasir Qadhi). It is also possible that some of the participants were attracted to the “hyper-performativity” of “celebrity *imams*.” The concept of “hyper-performativity” comes from Mahdi Tourage’s (2012) work in which he argues that western converts to Islam – specifically mentioning white male speakers from the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention – perform their religious beliefs to relate to many Muslims religious identities. Suhaib Webb is an example of this concept. He is a white convert *imam* whose charisma has attracted many Muslims. Webb and his Islamic preaching are examined in section 5.3.

The following is a chart that shows the numbers of followers for four of the religious leaders that were identified by participants. Other religious leaders were also identified but these four were named multiple times throughout my 50 interviews. The numbers of followers are organized by three of the popular social media platforms that were also identified by participants: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. All these popular religious leaders are verified on their accounts. The following chart shows the numbers of followers that each of the ‘celebrity *imams*’ have on their social media accounts. I refer to these popular *imams* as ‘celebrity *imams*’, because they are treated as such by their followers due to their charisma and their “hyper-

performative”¹³⁸ religiousness. These religious authority figures are given a celebrity status where they are held to special standard. For example, they are all verified on their social media accounts. Having a blue checkmark on their profiles means that they have been verified as authentic. On Twitter, 6 types of accounts are eligible for verification:

- 1) Government
- 2) Companies, brands, and non-profit organizations
- 3) News organizations and journalists
- 4) Entertainment
- 5) Sports and esports, and
- 6) Activists, organizers, and other influential individuals.¹³⁹

The ‘celebrity *imams*’ could be categorized under “other influential individuals.” This is because their large numbers of followers show how much influence they have. They are given the power to preach and share information or advice on social media to 100,000’s of people all around the world. Stewart Hoover (1997) argues that the shift in focus by scholars of religious studies from institutional to individual practice was necessary given the influence of media on religion.¹⁴⁰ Hence, my findings on ‘celebrity *imams*’ below supports this idea of the significance of studying individual religion and media.

¹³⁸ Tourage, 2012.

¹³⁹ <https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/twitter-verified-accounts>

¹⁴⁰ Page 86.

'Celebrity <i>Imams</i> ' and their Social Media Reach (Followers)			
Name	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
Yasir Qadhi	1,100,00+	600,800	219,000+
Mufti Menk	4,600,000+	8,500,00+	2,900,00
Suhaib Webb	939,182	122,500	105,000
Omar Suleiman	2,600,000+	447,200	816,000

Chart 1: Followers of each Islamic leader tabulated as of February 2022.

Ijtihad being used as a method of religious research by lay people has become increasingly common. Many people prefer to do their own research to verify what they have been told by religious leaders. At times, going to the local imam for religious advice or to discuss any matter may be intimidating for some women given the gender and power dynamics in mosques and traditional Islam. As a Muslim woman I have felt uncomfortable reaching out to *imams* to discuss some matters with male religious leaders. I recalled earlier about the time when I met Hamza Yusuf and felt weird approaching him because he was surrounded by men of all ages. He was shaking hands with his male fans and those who looked up to him, but there were not many – if any – women around him. Anna Piela examines 'grassroots' Muslim women's interpretations of Islamic sources and traditions on women-only forums. By examining the discussion posts on these forums, one of the things that Piela found is that women discussed gender issues within the Islamic framework and gave priority to specific Islamic education over Western and secular

education, even at the doctoral level. This was not case for the participants in my study, however. The participants valued traditional Islamic education just as much as Western education, including PhDs, when it came to 'celebrity *imams*'. This is discussed in each of the religious figures examined below. Furthermore, Piela found that the methodologies that these women used for interpreting Islamic sources included three main methods: 1) personal, individual engagement; 2) scholarly engagement; and 3) both types of engagement with critical Quranic and hadith engagement.¹⁴¹ The first method can be merged with *ijtihad* because the women in both cases are taking it upon themselves to make the decision on whatever matter is. They came up with their own conclusions after having done their research online just as did the participants in my study.

The level of their impact and significance for my participants, along with their contribution to making the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention a 'convergent space' warrants further discussion of each of the 'celebrity *imams*': Yasir Qadhi, Mufti Menk, Suhaib Webb, and Omar Suleiman. When thinking about what attracts young Muslims to RIS, we can add these celebrity religious authority figures to the list of reasons for attendance.

5.1 Yasir Qadhi

In 2018 and 2019, Yasir Qadhi was one of the featured speakers at RIS. Qadhi is an Islamic scholar based in Houston, Texas, and is one of the founders of the Al-Maghrib Institute, an online Islamic institution where users can take virtual classes with various Islamic teachers on a range of topics. He has a doctorate from Yale University and taught at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.

¹⁴¹ Page 137.

He is currently a resident scholar at the East Plano Islamic Center in Plano, Texas. Qadhi has over 1 million followers on Facebook. In interviews, participants confirmed that they were motivated to attend RIS to learn from key religious authority figures like Qadhi. P30, a 29-year-old female, considers Qadhi to be a trustable source: "I search a few credible sources like which according to me is credible, sunnah.com... there is Yasir Qadhi..." Along with the specific website, sunnah.com, she trusts Qadhi as a religious leader whose opinion on Islamic matters she can trust.



Figure 11: A screenshot from Qadhi's Facebook page taken on February 5, 2022, showing his number of followers.

P15 says:

Shaykh Yasir Qadhi posts a lot of travel of different places, he posts a lot of interesting research. There are a lot of people who have multi-academic, and the traditional Islamic training, so I try to follow them just because you are always learning something really interesting from them. Some people you just follow generally for the reminder that they offer...

P15 is a 24-year-old male who follows Qadhi because he possesses both traditional and academic backgrounds. By having religious or 'traditional' and secular educational training, Qadhi can attract Muslims who consider both types of training to be credible. Religious or 'traditional' training for Islamic scholars in the West usually refers to Islamic education obtained from well-known Islamic institutions in the Muslim world. For instance, Qadhi's Islamic background is from

the Islamic University of Medinah in Medina, Saudi Arabia. He has obtained a BA in Arabic and MA in Islamic Theology from there. P15 follows Qadhi so he can learn something from him as he appears on his timeline. He may not only search for Qadhi when he needs answers to his Islamic questions, but Qadhi's presence on his social media timeline serves P15 with welcomed Islamic reminders through his tweets and posts. Qadhi often tweets about his YouTube videos and shares historical facts. On March 12, 2022, Qadhi tweeted a picture of him with Mufti Menk (see Figure):

Both times I've met him, it's been unplanned – this time I drove two hours to Leicester to spend some quality time with my brother in faith whom I respect and connect with. May Allah bless you, your family, and your dawah @MuftiMenk 😊 !



Figure 12: Photo posted by Qadhi with this tweet on March 12, 2022.

Although they preach in different countries, they have many things in common, such as the same traditional Islamic education and their popularity among young Muslims in non-Muslim countries. They are both popular on social media and the participants in this study consider both of their Islamic opinions to be authentic and reliable. Hence, the emergence of a 'convergent space' at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention where these online-offline personalities are brought together in-person for their audience. Like Qadhi, Mufti Menk also has an Islamic

education from the Islamic University of Medinah, but his specialization is in Hanbali fiqh. Suhaib Webb has an Islamic degree from al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, and Omar Suleiman has a PhD in Islamic Thought and Civilization from the International Islamic University Malaysia. Their Islamic education history plays a role in how they are perceived as authentic Islamic scholars for their followers in the Western world – especially in Canada and the United States. Because some of them also have educational degrees from secular universities, Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries are more inclined to lean towards their religious leadership. They believe that these religious leaders have personal experience of being in both Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, and hence can advise on how to live a pious life in a non-Muslim nation. Therefore, P15 mentioned “multi-academic” in his consideration for authentic and reliable Muslim religious leaders.

5.2 Mufti Menk

Mufti Ismail ibn Musa Menk, often referred to simple as Mufti Menk, is based in Zimbabwe and has over seven million global followers on Twitter. He is particularly known for his motivational tweets and khutbahs (sermons) that incorporate comedy to attract attention from young Muslims. His traditional Islamic training is from the Islamic University of Madinah. The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan named him one of the 500 Most Influential Muslims in the World in 2013, 2014, and 2017.¹⁴² He is also the head of Zimbabwe’s fatwa department as the Grand Mufti of Zimbabwe. His Twitter bio has the following written in it: “Healing the Broken Heart” (see Figure 13). On March 5, 2022, he tweeted, “We all sin. Don’t despair. Keep repenting and asking for His forgiveness. Don’t let droplets of sins become oceans of regret. Be sincere and

¹⁴² <https://themuslim500.com/>

ask Him wholeheartedly.” This tweet received over 7,000 retweets and more than 26,000 likes.

On February 17, 2022, he tweeted:

Almighty. We sincerely ask You to make us better people today than we were yesterday. Help us win the fight between desire and discipline so we may get closer to You. Help us let go of negative people so we may become more positive and grateful with good character and conduct.

This tweet received 7,665 retweets and 27,100 likes. These numbers are the average numbers of retweets and likes on Menk’s tweets. The high numbers show that people on Twitter are engaging and interacting with Menk’s tweets, either by sharing it on their timelines or by saving it under their likes. Menk’s celebrity-like charisma is an attractive quality for his millions of loyal Twitter followers who are often mesmerized by his messages. P4 describes Menk in the following way:

This guy is cool as I went up to read about him. This guy is loved, and everybody likes this guy. He must be legit. He’s so kind and a heart-warming person. That’s about it and there was a very brief moment in my life where I watched Muslim YouTube and IG couples but that’s it. I fell out of that very quickly because it was very unhealthy for me anymore. It’s not.... Ok, we will get to that. Mufti Menk is that guy; he’s a nice guy. He is wonderful.

P4 is a 25-year-old female who has read about Menk and confirms his popularity and that he is loved by many. Because he is a well-known religious leader, she thinks that this makes him legitimate – meaning that there must be some sort of credibility and authenticity to his religious scholarship. She no longer watches any Muslim influencers on YouTube and on Instagram. It was only a fad for her which she says no longer interests her. However, P25 compares Menk to the famous 13th century Persian poet, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi. The 28-year-old female says,

He is so...in my opinion, he’s like Rumi. That’s a big thing but some of his things are so well-said. It’s so well-written and I’m like he needs to start a book or calendar because we need one of those every day.

Rather than comparing Menk to Rumi in relation to their religious status, it is their charismatic 'character' that stand out to her. She explains that Menk is very relatable to people's everyday lives which is why she suggests he can write a book or calendar. She believes people "need" his saying every day. Suhaib Webb was also identified as a religious authority figure who was able to relate to young Muslims.



Figure 13: A screenshot from Menk's Twitter page taken on March 9, 2022.

5.3 Suhaib Webb

Suhaib Webb was previously the *imam* at the Islamic Society of Boston. In 2016, he was especially popular among Muslim youth and was famous for delivering eight-second *fatawa* on Snapchat. He would allow users to submit Islamic questions to him, which he would answer in eight seconds on Snapchat. He would use filters sometimes as well that were available on Snapchat. This way

of preaching was attractive to young Muslims. Webb proved to be a religious leader with preaching styles outside of the traditional (in-mosque, strict presence) style. Webb presented himself as someone who could relate to young Muslims based on his khutbah content and how he presented Islamic information. His lectures focused on how Muslims can live a pious life in the West without worrying about the compatibility of Islam and the West. Muslims could live in non-Muslim majority countries peacefully. In addition to this, his virtual sermons integrated references to popular media like the TV show, *The Walking Dead*, which made his preaching style more attractive to the younger crowd and Muslims who were interested in popular culture. Webb showed that one could incorporate popular media into religion, and that was okay. He did not denounce movies, films, and tv shows like some local *imams* would on the basis that these things are not religious. For example, someone asked on IslamQ&A in 2006 what the ruling on watching videos is in Islam, including documentaries.¹⁴³ The answer was that if these videos did not show anyone's *awrah* (intimate parts of the human body that must be covered according to Islamic texts), immoral actions, music, or obscene talk, then it is permissible in Islam. However, the website continues to say that,

Watching movies has a bad effect on the individual and on the ummah. These include the following:

- 1-Provocation of desires.
- 2-Propagation of immorality which is made attractive and easily accessible.
- 3-Teaching and justification of crime, and making it familiar to young and old.
- 4-Corruption of married life, by making the wife seem ugly to the husband and vice versa, by showing images of attractive girls and men.
- 5-Spreading corrupt beliefs which are based on *kaafir* theories, such as the theory of evolution, or attributing the powers of creation and destruction to researchers and inventors, or propagating magic, soothsaying and claims to know the unseen, or making fun of religion and religious people, and other things which appear in movies that are shown to young and old.

¹⁴³ Question 85232.

6-Wasting time and draining away energy, living with illusions far removed from reality. And there are other evil consequences.¹⁴⁴

This is similar to the *fatawa* that were studied by al-Kandari and Dashti (2015), were Saudi clerics declared a fatwa on the prohibition of using the Internet in the early 2000s. They argued that the Internet encouraged things that Islam forbids such as music and co-ed interaction, and would ultimately bring evil and immorality to society.¹⁴⁵ Movies could be included in this as well which is why watching movies is prohibited for some Muslims. They believe that movies have negative impacts on Muslims. Because IslamQ&A is a popular website visited by many Muslims including participants in this study, it could be said that this opinion or ruling on watching movies is well known by the Muslim community. However, it does not mean that it is followed by majority of Muslims because that depends on their personal beliefs and understandings of Islamic matters. Muslims have their own ways of practicing Islam and their expressions of lived Islam showcase this.

P5 was one of the participants who named Webb as a religious leader that she follows on social media, more specifically on Snapchat: "I know like, the good thing about social media is that so many sheiks are on it. I have like Suhaib Webb on Snapchat." CNN did a segment on 25 Influential American Muslims and Webb was one of them. His video monologue on CNN is captioned, "More than once, Imam Suhaib Webb has been mistaken for a Christian pastor. Hear what happened when one woman gave him a crucifix at the airport."¹⁴⁶ In this 1:17 minute video, Webb tells the story of how he was on a plane and was on the phone trying to resolve an issue

¹⁴⁴ Islam Question & Answer, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/85232/the-evil-consequences-of-watching-movies>

¹⁴⁵ Page 139.

¹⁴⁶ "Imam Suhaib Webb: He's the 'Snapchat Imam' - CNN Video." 2018.

that a Muslim couple were having. A woman seated next to him proceeded to follow him when he got off the plane. She had assumed that Webb was a Christian pastor and thanked him for doing Jesus' work after having overheard him on the phone. She was shocked when Webb told him that he is Muslim, and this is when he explained to her that Muslims are diverse and not monolithic. Webb is a Caucasian imam who converted to Islam at a young age. This may explain why the woman may have just assumed that he is a Christian pastor and not a Muslim imam. His experience as a convert and someone who grew up in America is something that many young Muslims can relate to. His adaption of social media into his preaching style is also appealing to those Muslims who do not practice Islam in a tradition sense (i.e., visiting or praying at the mosque).¹⁴⁷ Webb is a prime example of a celebrity imam who influences Muslims, allowing them to practice Islam in their own ways in their offline lives. Webb's popularity displays how digital elements of online religion are brought into offline spaces – or in this case, in people's offline lives. People interact with and consider authority from such *imams* on social media, allowing them to influence how they choose to practice Islam in the offline world. Through his celebrity status, along with approved authenticity of religious teachings, Webb easily influences Muslims every day. The approval of his authenticity comes from the large number of following that he has, who in turn give him the authority to preach Islamic matters. When *imams* like him attend conventions like Reviving the Islamic Spirit, they contribute to a creation of a 'convergent space'.

¹⁴⁷ I met Webb in 2014 when I was doing my master's on Muslim identity. I was visiting the Islamic Society of Boston and had the opportunity to speak with him on young Muslims in Canada and the United States. He is a very approachable *imam* compared to some of the other popular *imams*. For example, when I met Hamza Yusuf in 2015 who was also named by some participants as someone that they look up to for guidance, I felt as if I had to keep a distance from him as a woman and could not approach him like Muslim men did at RIS. Whereas with Webb, I did not feel this way and Webb was very friendly and respectful with me.

Figure 14 shows a screenshot of Webb's Instagram page. In his bio, it shows that he is the founder of, and an instructor at, SWISS. SWISS is an acronym for the Suhaib Webb Institute of Sacred Sciences. This institute operates mostly online and offers access to Islamic courses taught by instructors like Webb himself. He is also a researcher at the Islamic Center at New York University. Webb's Islamic and secular background allows him to connect to people who come from one or both worlds.



Figure 14. Screenshot of Webb's Instagram account showing that he has over 121,000 followers taken on March 9, 2022.

5.4 Omar Suleiman

Omar Suleiman is a founder of Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research—an institute that is mostly online and sometimes holds offline events—and an Adjunct Professor of Islamic Studies at Southern Methodist University. For his Islamic education, he has a PhD in Islamic Thought and Civilization from the International Islamic University Malaysia. He too has appealing qualities that have resulted in him having over two million followers on Facebook (Figure 15).



Figure 15: Screenshot of Omar Suleiman's Facebook page taken Feb 9, 2022.

P25 earlier compared Menk to Rumi, and below she explains that she is inspired by Suleiman's preaching. She compares him to Qadhi, pointing out that he does not have a preaching style where it seems like Suleiman is "yelling." The "yelling" or the loud manner that some religious leaders use for their lectures is not appealing to P5 because it outweighs the points that they are trying to get across. Their loud speaking is distracting from the content of the lectures, even if the loudness is coming from a place of passion and enthusiasm. She likes it when she can relate and listen to religious leaders who appear "calm." She says:

Ok. I guess one person that I was really looking forward to from the talk was Shaykh Omar Suleiman. I really respect his work and his approach tackling certain topics and addressing them in a very easy to understand kind of way and in a way that makes you feel uplifted and feeling hopeful that there's something that you can do whether personally or communally as a community. Other speakers that kind of stand out to me and like other political speakers are like Yasir Qadhi. Personally, he's not someone I'll connect with but I know a lot of people respect him, listen to him. I think for me the way that the speakers speak, the tone and their pace that speaks to me more sometimes than their message. I like speakers that are calm, and they are not in a hurry and yelling I mean the yelling sometimes comes from passion but the way that it is sometimes communicated, that to me weighs on my decision going on hearing the speaker out or not.

5.5 'Celebrity *imams*' and Religious Authority

Interestingly, the participants in this study struggled to answer: "What does religious authority look like, and how is it considered to be authentic?" 'Celebrity *imams*' like Yasir Qadhi, Suhaib Webb, Mufti Menk, and Omar Suleiman offer these young Muslims opportunities to relate to figures of religious authority where they can interact with them through the following common actions: "follow," "like," and "retweet." They had no definite answers for what they consider religious authority and what they consider to be truly authentic. They have ideas like they discussed above where traditional and secular education played a role. So did charisma and popularity of religious leaders, along with specific references to primary Islamic texts like the Quran and hadith.

While I encountered 'celebrity *imams*' in this study, Saminaz Zaman examined what she calls 'cyber-muftis' who could be like 'celebrity *imams*'. She found how *imams* have been able to market themselves as 'cyber-muftis.'¹⁴⁸ One example that she illustrates is of Boston's Imam Talal Eid who once served at the Islamic Centre of New England, and when he was no longer in that position, he brought his services online to imamtalaleid.com.¹⁴⁹ She also discussed other popular figures such as Hamza Yusuf and Tariq Ramadan. Zaman argues that although these *imams* have contributed to the pluralism of Islam online and in result, supported the growth of hermeneutic identities, there are still conflicts regarding the universality of correct Islamic interpretations.¹⁵⁰ Zaman's assumptions here are accurate, however challenges and conflicts over Islamic interpretations will always exist because of the difference of opinions – scholarly and individual

¹⁴⁸ Page 467.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Page 473.

– and this is complicated by Sunni Islam, where there is no central authority figure. There may be many “cyber-muftis” who have been given the authority by education, followers, and other factors that are considered authentic by certain individuals, but they cannot fill in the gap that exists due to varying Islamic interpretations. These gaps will always exist and not just in Islam, but also in other religions and worldviews.

Religious authority as a concept has multiple meanings. Based on the interviews I conducted, religious authority for the participants means having an authentic Islamic education, references to Islamic primary sources, and having a large following on social media platforms. These three factors are needed to consider someone authentic and to allow them to have religious authority. However, we can take into consideration the multiple layers of authority that Heidi Campbell (2007) reveals: hierarchy, structure, ideology, and texts to determine what kind of religious power these ‘celebrity *imams*’ exhibit. First, hierarchy refers to recognised religious or community leaders. Second, structure is associated with patterns of practice of official organizations or communities, while, thirdly, ideology is beliefs, ideas of faith or shared identity. Finally, texts refer to official religious books and teachings.¹⁵¹ Campbell illustrates that multiple faith communities point out these layers of religious authority for authenticity that are found in their religious communities.¹⁵² She worked with Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities. Although this presents a well-rounded theoretical framework to map out what constructs religious power, I would like to emphasize how much importance is given to each of the three layers of religious authority. For instance, many participants identified ideology and texts to be

¹⁵¹ Page 1048.

¹⁵² Page 1059.

their main priorities for consideration of religious power, rather than hierarchy or structure. They cared more about what was being presented and through what sources, rather than who was presenting it and whether they had a formal position in a Muslim organization. More questions to consider in relation to multiple layers of authority include: How do hierarchy and structures of religious authority showcase online? Does this relate to those who hold formal positions in Muslim institutions only? While ideology and texts are easy to spot online through authority figures and practitioners, the other two may be difficult.

5.6 Celebrity Imam vs Muslim Influencers

Muslim influencers online could also be considered significant in shaping the religious understandings of young Muslims who visit the internet for religious purposes. Although the participants identified celebrity *imams* over influencers, some of them did mention that they followed Muslim couples who vlogged (video blog) their lives or other Muslim influencers who they followed on Instagram or YouTube. Elif Kavakci and Camille R. Kraeplin examined this notion of Muslim influencers in "Religious Beings in Fashionable Bodies: The Online Identity Construction of Hijabi Social Media Personalities" (2017). They examined three high-profile hijabi fashion and lifestyle bloggers. First was the #Mipsterz video¹⁵³ in which young hijabi Muslim women are shown posing for the camera as Jay-Z's *Somewhere in America* is playing. The three hijabi bloggers which they studied were: Ascia Akf with over 1.4 million followers on Instagram¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68sMkDKMias>. You can watch the video on YouTube but the sound has been removed due to copyright.

¹⁵⁴ The follower counts of Ascia and the other bloggers on Instagram and other social media are from 2015. They have since increased.

who lives in Kuwait; Dina Torkia, also known as Dina Tokio, with over 500,00 million combined followers on all her online accounts from London; and Yasemin Kanae with 136,000 Instagram followers from Florida. All three of these hijabi bloggers have followers that consist of all types of people from around the world including young Muslim men and women. Ascia Akf has been a target of negative responses from her followers and others in the Muslim community for sharing information that some would consider private and information that they would not expect a hijabi to share on a public platform. Dino Tokio also shares some personal information online with her community of fans. She frequently posts images and videos of her family where she is heard using mildly profane language. She also posts YouTube videos with her husband where they discuss their married life and, occasionally, intimate information from which others can benefit.¹⁵⁵ Yasemine Kanae is no different from the other two when it comes to the sharing of personal and private information, like posting her wedding video online. The authors describe her as having “Marilyn Monroe-esque gesture and mannerisms.”¹⁵⁶ It seems like female Muslim influencers are prone to more negative responses online than are male celebrity *imams*. This could be because they may be considered informal celebrity figures because they do not have traditional Islamic authority to persuade Muslims on a certain matter, or perhaps the view that having large numbers of followers for Muslim figures should be reserved for those with a religious education. Their gender may also play a role in how they are perceived within the Muslim community and why they are criticized so often, rather than the male religious figures examined in this study.

¹⁵⁵ Page 861.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Both 'celebrity *imams*' and Muslim influencers illustrate the importance of cyberspace in how Islamic information is passed on, understood, and practiced by individuals in their everyday lives. Both influence ordinary Muslims in their own practices and Islamic beliefs. In relation to Islamic authority and authenticity, the findings in this thesis project show that the internet allows users to verify authority figures and authentic information. Although the understanding of authenticity has come to mean something that is private and individual, it is verified online. For instance, participants discussed that they would search Islamic questions on the internet, but they would also cross-check the information that they found with other online or offline sources like websites, people that they trust like parents, and participants would look for references to the primary Islamic texts – the Quran and hadith. Once they were able to check and verify the information, they would then proceed with believing the information that they are given and incorporating it into their everyday lives. This is directly relevant to 'convergent spaces.' Because of the online influence into offline beliefs and practice, the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention creates this convergent space for it happen. Both online and offline are coming together and this ends up being one of the reasons that young Muslims are inclined to attend RIS, and are influenced by the speakers and activities occurring at RIS.

5.7 Gender and Religious Authority

I noticed that when discussing religious authority and authenticity with the participants in this study, almost all of them identified male religious authority figures. The conversations about 'celebrity *imams*' were always male dominated, as if only male Islamic scholars had the authority to dictate what is Islamically authentic. In the past, however, female leaders from Islamic

communities were also part of RIS' distinguished scholars and speakers. These female leaders included Dahlia Mogahed, Yasmin Mogahed, and Iesha Prime. However, the number of female speakers was always outnumbered by male speakers. In 2021, RIS was held virtually. They featured 16 "distinguished scholars and presenters." Out of 16 of the speakers, only two were women: Salma Yaqoub and Iesha Prime. Below is a screenshot from their website with photos of the scholars and presenters.

DISTINGUISHED SCHOLARS & PRESENTERS



Figure 16: Screenshot taken on June 4, 2022, illustrating the featured speakers and presenters at RIS for 2021.

Furthermore, the female speakers who are present at RIS do not claim to be the female equivalents of male *imams*, but rather the title given to them is *ustadha*, which typically refers to a teacher who has attended an Islamic institution. The male equivalent of *ustadha* is *ustadh*.

The Qalam Foundation – an Islamic institution founded by AbdulNasir Jangda (another RIS speaker mentioned by participants) – defines *ustadh* or *ustadha* as the following:

This title is used for a man or woman who has graduated from an institute of higher Islamic learning (such as but not limited to the Qalam Alimiyyah program) and is beginning their journey of community work and teaching. This title may also be used for a man or woman who is a certified specialist in a particular field of Islamic studies, without having graduated from an institute of higher Islamic learning (such as but not limited to the Qalam Alimiyyah program).¹⁵⁷

However, *for imam*, they specifically reserve this term for men. They state on their website that, “this title is used for a man who has graduated from an institute of higher Islamic learning (such as but not limited to the Qalam Alimiyyah program) and serves as the leader of a community in the official capacity of Imam.”¹⁵⁸ This illustrates the gender gap that exists within some of the Muslim communities. The topic of whether a female can be an *imam* is debated within Muslim communities. Female *imams* do exist, but not within the mainstream understanding of Islam. Female *imams* are often criticized for leading prayer or giving khutbah as those religious acts are understood as being reserved for male leaders (Krausen 2013; Busyro 2017; Hill 2018; Petersen 2019). It is important to note that the understanding of *imam* that I am discussing here is from a Sunni perspective. Other Islamic traditions have different meanings associated to imam. For example, for most Shia Muslims, an *imam* comes from divine lineage – the family of Prophet Muhammad – and some Sufi communities consider female *imams* to be the norm.¹⁵⁹

The lack of mention of female authority figures in the interviews that I conducted and their lessor presence at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention shows the male-dominated

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.qalam.foundation/titles>.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Hill, 2018.

hierarchy that is present in mainstream Islam. This was one of the reasons that I, as a female doctoral candidate, felt uncomfortable at times at RIS when I approached men at RIS as a part of my recruitment process. This included meeting male RIS speakers in-person. The gender gap is apparent in how people at RIS communicated with each other, in addition to having significantly more male speakers than female. I was able to observe this as a part of analyzing the social hierarchy at RIS. Male figures are given more platforms in general, such as at RIS, to practice and convey their religious authority to people. Although cyberspace provides a platform to anyone and female Islamic scholars have had success in locating their followers and community, the takeover of male scholars in offline spaces is problematic. It takes away opportunities from female Islamic scholars to share their Islamic knowledge with others. They do have opportunities to do this online through websites, social media accounts, and virtual conferences, but they need to be present at spaces like Reviving the Islamic Spirit where both online and offline spaces meet to emphasize the need for inclusivity and diversity for female Islamic scholars.

5.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how young Muslims create their own ways of practicing Islam and formulating religious identity. They conduct religious research online and navigate among the limitless information found in online spaces. By discussing their use of the internet to approve or reject religious authority, young Muslims show us how they inform their decisions on authenticity and differentiate between authentic versus unauthentic religious information on the internet. 'Celebrity *imams*' such as the ones identified by participants and examined in this chapter (Yasir Qadhi, Mufti Menk, Suhaib Webb, and Omar Suleiman) influence young Muslims who practiced Islam in their own ways in offline spaces. The religious leaders can bring digital elements of online

religion into offline spaces which includes people's offline lives. They are given celebrity status and approved by their followers as religious authorities. When these *imams* attend conventions like Reviving the Islamic Spirit, they contribute to a creation of a 'convergent space'. However, the lack of female authority figures at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention and in the interviews that I conducted shows the male-dominated hierarchy that is present in mainstream Islam.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

Islam as a lived religion is practiced by many Muslims in ways that make it more personal and individualistic than a religion that is officiated by religious persons or institutions. In this case, Islam has come to mean many different things to Muslims. For the participants in this doctoral research project, Islam is a way of life that they practice and making sense of through their everyday lives. Islam was a part of how they interacted with others, how they dressed, found senses of community, and belonging, and their personal connections with God. Their Islam was practiced in both physical and virtual spaces. Although participants had access to cyberspace where there are infinite sources of Islamic information, they struggled to identify the authenticity of some Islamic information. This resulted in their fascination with religious authority figures who have large online followings. They researched and followed 'celebrity *e-mams*' to verify some Islamic information that they subsequently applied to their offline lives. Some of the figures that were explicitly identified by participants were: Yasir Qadhi, Mufti Menk, Omar Suleiman, and Sohaib Webb. These authority figures were discussed in detail in the previous chapter of this thesis. Apart from these popular *imams*, others were also mentioned throughout the interviews. For example, participants brought up Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir, Faraz Rabbani, Dalia Moghahed, Tariq Jameel, Siraj Wahhaj, Yahya Rhodus, and others. Most, if not all have been featured speakers at RIS at some point.

6.1 Summary of Findings

The aim of this thesis was to examine how Muslims – Muslims from the Millennial generation in Canada and the United States – navigated and researched religious matters online, and how this

related to their lives offline. Their attendance and participation at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit conference in Toronto illustrated their interest and comfort in doing religious practices and finding religious information and communities online, while at the same time trying to fulfill the offline community needs. They sought a sense of belonging and sense of community which they found at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention – a 'convergent space'.

The findings from this research showed that Muslim Millennials who attended RIS and identified as Muslim-Canadian or Muslim-American had their own individualistic ways of implementing Islam into their everyday lives. They understood Islamic practices and beliefs in their own ways and had their own paths to seek and validate Islamic information. The internet played a large role in how they accessed Islamic information. They were active on social media – mainly on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – and followed Muslim scholars. The Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention was a place for them where they could see and meet the Islamic authority figures that they followed online, in-person. RIS brought together both of their online and offline worlds. RIS acted as an intersection space – again, it was a 'convergent space'. I introduced this term in this thesis to refer to a location that is in between the online and offline, bringing together elements from both worlds. While similar to the term hybridity in which there is a mixture of two things, a 'convergent space' emphasizes characteristics from online and offline without saturating any of the original elements. It is not a mix, nor a fusion. I argued in this thesis that RIS is a 'convergent space' because it provides an intersecting space to the online religious world to be present in the offline world which in turn influences religious behaviours for people in their everyday lives. 'Convergent spaces' play an important role in how these Muslims practice lived Islam. It allows them to have their own varied understandings of Islam.

Since Campbell and Lövheim (2017) claimed that we are currently in the fourth wave of research on religion and media, perhaps the introduction of concepts like the 'convergent space' and discussion of COVID-19 are a steppingstone into the fifth wave. In this introduction of a 'convergent space', the focus is not on one aspect of religion and media, but it focuses on both where this kind of space is existent because Reviving the Islamic Spirit has brought together both online and offline religions. Religion does not necessarily need to be located because it is already there, and the same goes for media because people who are actively participating in a 'convergent space' are also active on social media platforms – hence their interest in online religion in physical spaces like Reviving the Islamic Spirit. A 'convergent space' includes digital religion as it is understood by Campbell (2013) which is where technological spaces allow online and offline spaces to be integrated and blended. The concept of a 'convergent space' builds on Lundby's (2013) theory of Social Shaping of Technology. As explained earlier, this theory includes four perspectives of analysis: : 1) specific history and traditions of the religious communities under study; 2) core beliefs and patterns of the religious communities; 3) negotiation process and new media; and, 4) framing and the discourse on new media within a specific religious community.¹⁶⁰ RIS presents a 'convergent space' in which the online religion components include all four of the Lundby's analyses of history, beliefs, negotiation new media, and discourse of new media. For the Muslims in this study, religion on new media such as social media has not replaced traditional Islam, nor has it forced Islamic authority to strictly exist online, but it does both – to exist in online and offline spaces without jeopardizing the authority of any.

¹⁶⁰ Page 233.

Reviving the Islamic Spirit presents a similar event to the Catholic World Youth Day that Hepp and Krotz (2010) analyzed. In their analysis of different types of media events, they examine three “scripts” of media events that illustrate the individualization and mediatization of religion : 1) “contest” where events would take place under agreed rules in a place like an arena or stadium organized around legal authority (similar to debates at RIS around Islamic authority), 2) “conquest” which is usually a single day event like the televised moon landing that falls under charismatic authority (speaking events at RIS), and 3) “coronation,” which is a recurrent media event that takes place on traditions in public spaces and confirms to traditional authority (the entirety of RIS as a convention with religious authority). The experience and participation of Muslims at RIS also builds on Stout’s (2012) claims of religion and media. He argues that organized religion is found in multiple forms of media and many elements of religion like ritual and belief are experienced through popular media. RIS shows that these claims are true by bringing attention to the online Islamic world and the multiple forms of religious authority found online.

The findings from this study also help us to understand the influences that shape young Muslims’ religious identities. RIS as an intersecting space is essential for the young Muslims that choose to be there every year. Not only do they have opportunities to learn about themselves and understand religious matters on their own terms, navigate through the vast available Islamic information, but they also find themselves negotiating the meanings of religious authority. As discussed in Chapter 3, the research questions guiding this dissertation were: What attracts young Muslims to RIS? What are their aims and objectives for attending RIS? Does participation at RIS influence online and offline religious behaviours? If so, in which ways? How are digital

elements of online religion (such as virtual religious practices and religious forum discussions) brought into offline spaces like RIS? and what happens when the two physical and virtual religious spaces come together such as the intersection at RIS?

In attempting to answer these research questions, the data revealed 8 main themes pertaining to *ijtihad*, lived Islamic practices, and beliefs, “cyber-Islamic environments;” a sense of belonging and community at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention; the significance of RIS; Muslim identity as Canadians and Americans; the aftermath of 9/11 and experiences of Islamophobia; and authority and authenticity.

Participants had their own ways of doing Islamic research. Most of the times, this included going online to find answers about questions that they were curious about. Doing online Islamic research consists of looking through Islam Question & Answer websites, YouTube videos of Islamic scholars that they trusted, cross-checking the information that they found online with their trusted offline sources such as family members or other *imams*, and following ‘celebrity *e-mam*’ on their social media accounts. This was their way of conducting *ijtihad*. Similar to previous studies (Leur 2015; Singh 2014; Lövheim 2004) on young people who went online to negotiate their identities, my research further builds on these ideas of negotiation and construction of identities in online spaces. The difference in my research is that the participants’ religious identities end up being informed by the religious information that they find online, along with their experiences at RIS which is a combination of online and offline religion. While Singh was focused on young people and their Sikh identities finding that the internet is useful for them discussing taboo subjects, exploring diverse Sikh practices, purchasing Sikh resources like books and clothing and, accessing a variety of resources, among other uses, the same could be said for

the participants in this study. They used the Internet for similar purposes. In fact, using the internet for these things made them a part of CIE – cyber-Islamic environments (Bunt 2018). All the online components of the research findings take place in “cyber-Islamic environments.” Participants used the internet to access social media, fatwa Q&As, explore religious authority and authenticity, and seek other Islamic activities online. All of these are a part of CIEs. I argued in this dissertation that the online media components of RIS should be considered CIEs as well.

In addition, participants spoke about the sense of belonging and community at RIS. They found the environment to be more welcoming than other spaces in their lives, such as educational institutions and/or workplaces. They felt like they belonged there as Muslims and their level of religiosity was not a factor in being accepted in such a space. They would take time off work, travel to Toronto if they were not residents, and attend all three days of the convention. Some participants described this as their annual family vacation. They also discussed how this three-day convention was very significant in their lives, hence their annual attendance for most of them. It made them feel happy and emotional being present at the convention. The US participants found that RIS reflected the multiculturalism of Canada and were impressed that it was able to offer such a large space to Muslims every year.

In relation to lived religious practices and beliefs, participants identified certain practices and rituals that they performed in their everyday lives. These were different from the mainstream 5 pillars of Islam. Many participants did identify believing in and following the 5 pillars of Islam, but they also had additional practices and rituals that they performed such as reading Rumi’s poetry or focusing on their moral characters and being polite to others as a part of their everyday Islam. These findings built on Jeldtoft’s research on ‘configured religious practices’. She defined

'configured religious practices' as "how Muslims reshape and reformulate religious practices in highly individualistic, inclusive, and pragmatic ways. They 'cut a heel and a toe' to make Islamic rituals make sense for them at a personal level."¹⁶¹ This is exactly how some of the participants in my research understood Islam. In this way, they made sense of the Islamic practices and beliefs. They did things that they considered Islamic whether they were part of the mainstream understanding of Islam or not. These practices were not prescribed institutionally or by religious authority figures, which made them personalized for the individual and were a part of their Lived Religion and Lived Islam.

As for living as Muslims in Canada and the United States, participants identified both pros and cons. Some discussed that although Canada allowed freedom of religion, it also distracted them from practicing Islam by not being in a Muslim-majority country. Others discussed that it was a privilege to live as a Muslim in (most of) Canada and were appreciative for opportunities to express their Muslim identity that other communities may not allow due to anti-Muslim policies, like in Quebec or Islamophobia fueled by 9/11. Being Muslim in Canada and the United States did not restrict their Lived Religion practices. They were still able to practice and understand Islam in the ways that they wanted to. 'Celebrity *imams*' were easily accessible on social media platforms and at Reviving the Islamic Spirit.

The impact of 9/11 and experiences of Islamophobia were sensitive but important topics for almost all the participants. Each participant shared a story about their experience with Islamophobia. Many of the Muslim women who were visibly Muslim because of their hijab discussed how it made them a target whether in minor or major ways. A few of them spoke about

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

wearing the hijab as a part of their initiative to educate others about Islam and to purposely stand out as visible Muslim women. Participants in all three places – Canada, United States, and cyberspace – experienced Islamophobia. They were not concerned about being targeted at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention, but they thought that it was a place where they can develop ways to challenge Islamophobia as a community.

Like Hamdani's (2020) research where he finds that the digital world allows Muslims "*fatwa shop*", the participants in this study had their own figures of religious authority that they trusted which is why they attended RIS to see them in-person. They agreed with their preaching and the Islamic information that they shared on their social media platforms. However, although the participants were engaging with 'celebrity *e-mams*' online and trusted their preaching, this did not mean for them to move offline religious authority to a more democratic online religious authority, as was the case for Hamdani's subjects. The participants at RIS appreciated the religious authority figures in both online and offline spaces. The last finding concerns how participants verified the information that they found online and how it informed their lived religious beliefs and practices. References to primary religious sources – Quran and hadith – were top priority, followed by trustable family members, friends, and religious leaders. They conducted their own research online and confirmed the findings that would influence their religious practices in their everyday lives. Among others, they identified four 'celebrity *e-mams*' that they followed on their social media accounts. The following religious leaders are all verified on their social media accounts. I refer to these popular *imams* as 'celebrity *e-mams*' because they are treated as such by their followers because of their charisma, and "hyper-performative"¹⁶²

¹⁶² Tourage, 2012.

religiousness: Yasir Qadhi, Mufti Menk, Suhaib Webb, and Omar Suleiman. An important thing to note is that there was a lack of mention of female authority figures in the interviews that I conducted and the gender gap at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention is prominent, as is evident in how females and males at RIS communicate with each other, and that a significant majority of Islamic speakers are male.

It is no doubt that social media plays a significant role in meaning-making of religious matters for Muslim youth. Hence, the participants in my research use social media to connect with and watch 'celebrity *e-mams*' online. Nisa (2018) found in her work that Instagram is used by young Muslim Indonesian women to teach each other about being virtuous Muslims, and that Instagram provides them with a space where they can construct their own religious identities. While the participants in my research referred to specific 'celebrity *imams*' that they followed online or looked up to for guidance, Zaman (2008) researched how American Muslims interacted with popular *imams* who had their own shows. Zaman called them 'media muftis', who could be compared with my participants' 'celebrity *e-mams*'. Zaman argued that these popular *imams* challenged traditional authority, but in the case of the 'celebrity *imams*' that were discussed in this dissertation, they are a form of traditional authority that is now online. They are not separate from traditional authority but have active online lives. What makes them a part of 'traditional authority' is that participants identified their source of religious information which are from Islamic institutions and using primary Islamic texts as sources.

Although seeking Islamic information online is an individual act, the online world has multiple transnational/international communities. By going online to seek Islamic information, individuals become a part of the online Islamic world and CIEs. In other words, the online Islamic

world – like other religious and nonreligious communities online – offers a space where people can feel a sense of belonging and community like Reviving the Islamic Spirit. This research illustrated what the online Islamic world looks like and this includes social media, Q&A websites, and other apps and websites with Islamic information and discussions. The online difference with RIS and the online Islamic world is their locations, and in the end, Muslims are part of the *ummah* when they identify as Muslims.

Among these main findings, I argue that RIS is a 'convergent space'. It provides space to the online religious world to be present in the offline world. This influences the religious beliefs, practices, and understandings for young Muslims in Canada and the United States as illustrated in this dissertation. I have introduced 'convergent space' as a term to refer to a location that is in between online and offline bringing together elements from both worlds. It emphasizes the characteristics from online and offline without any mixing or fusion, unlike the concept of hybridity.

Through participant observation, I noticed that participants at RIS interacted with religious people in power in a hierarchical manner. The religious authority figures such as Yasir Qadhi and Zaid Shakir were approached by Muslim men much more than Muslim women. They were followed around the marketplace area of the convention by many fans. Many of these 'celebrity *e-mams*' were not only there as invited speakers, but some of them were also there for the interactive 360 Stage portion of the bazaar where people could interact with them in-person. Some of them had booths set up to promote their religious institutions as well like Yaqeen Institute. These popular *e-mams* certainly brought the 'celebrity' culture to RIS because they were glamourized by their fans in this physical space.

6.2 Research Limitations

In conducting my fieldwork, recruitment was limited to attendees of the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention. Getting in touch with the organizers of Reviving the Islamic Spirit was a difficult task at first given that this convention occurs only once a year and the organizers are not active on social media until the second half of the year. The emails that I had sent out to RIS' email were unanswered for a few months until I finally tried to contact them via social media. I was able to obtain their permission for recruitment on site. Although I was able to successfully recruit participants for this study, I believe I would have been able to recruit many more people outside of the convention itself. At RIS, the first year of recruitment, I took a casual approach by speaking to attendees informally about my research and walking around the marketplace area. I did not have the organizers' permission to speak to any attendees in any other areas. This meant that I could not speak to attendees for recruitment purposes in other areas like the speaker hall, the entrance and exit areas, and any other places except the marketplace. It is possible that I could have gotten different data if I spoke to attendees who did not spend a lot of time at the marketplace, but more time in the speaker hall. In the second year of recruitment, RIS organizers gave me a booth where I setup my recruitment cards and posters. This was more successful than the previous year because attendees approach me to find out more about my research. They showed interest themselves. In both the years of recruitment in 2018 and 2019, I was able to get more than 90 sign ups in both the years. However, most of the people that ended up as participants were from the second year of recruitment and through snowballing. I wish that I was able to recruit more people for the study.

Another limitation that I noticed during my recruitment process was that many of the participants were Canadian. Although my intention was to interview both Canadian and American attendees, majority of the people who approached me were Canadian. There were many American attendees at Reviving the Islamic Spirit and some of them expressed interest in my research too. However, when it came to scheduling the interviews, we were unable to find availability or most of the American attendees did not reply to any of my queries. It is possible that our distance was one reason for this. When RIS ended, everyone went back to their everyday lives. The Christmas holidays were over, and people went back to going to work, school, and any other daily commitments that they have throughout the year. Perhaps the Canadian participants found it easier to connect with me given that we were in the same country, so if we needed to meet in-person, it was possible. These are just some of my speculations as to why I ended up having more Canadian participants than a good mix of both Canadian and American participants. Unfortunately, because I ended up with less American participants, I can only reflect on some of the American context. At the same time, having had more Canadian participants in this study, has given me very useful data for the Canadian context.

Most of my participants identified as Sunni Muslims or "just Muslim". I did have a few participants who identified as Shia, but most of them did not want to get into discussions about religious affiliations. Originally, I was hoping that I could speak to some Muslims who identified as Muslim minorities, but this was not the case. This limitation can serve as being representative of RIS' inclusive environment. This environment provided a sense of belonging and community for the attendees, hence the hesitation to discuss separate religious affiliation. Although Reviving

the Islamic Spirit is known for its diversity of Muslims and international attendees, the participants in this study do not reflect that.

6.3 Implications for Future Research

This dissertation offers many potential research projects that can emerge from the findings. For example, researchers could explore the topic of intra-religious authority and what this means for the global Muslim community. As explained in this dissertation, religious authority has various understandings and is dependent on context and communities. In the case of the participants, it is directly relevant to the Muslim community, but how do Muslims around the world make sense of it? It is true that different Muslim communities have different perspectives on Muslim religious authority, but does this cause any conflict or peace within the Muslim community? How do Muslims – of all ages- make meaning of religious authority? What constitutes as religious authority? In exploring this, the diversity of Muslims and Muslimness can be highlighted. In addition to religious authority and its meaning making, researchers could take this further by examining the influence of cyberspace on inter- and intra-religious issues. What does the internet contribute to such problems, or does it offer any solutions? How is social media being used by other religious and nonreligious communities in similar situations when it comes to thinking about religious? Does hybridity play any role in how both inter- and intra-religious issues are understood and perceived? Furthermore, the findings from this study also showed that young Muslims in Western countries often must find a medium – an in-between space – for identity, religion, relationships, communities, and more. Many times, this medium is found online, but how is it translated to offline or to hybrid spaces? What makes the online medium so different

from physical spaces? As we move further into more digital advancement and the emergence of artificial intelligence in many aspects of our lives, how can AI influence religiosity and religious authority? Will AI become a core component of online religion? It is important to think of these questions as more apps and AI are developed to be incorporated into people's everyday lives.

Results further showed that some participants struggled to find a sense of belonging which encouraged them to attend and participate in the Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention. Future research can focus on this aspect and shed light on what exactly are young Muslims (as well as those of older ages) lacking in terms of community, and how is this found in spaces like Reviving the Islamic Spirit? What does a sense of belonging and sense of community mean to Muslims? Is it an individual matter or a community matter? How are differences within Muslim communities resolved? Examining this also begs the question of whether a global Muslim community or *ummah* exists. If it does, what does it refer to? Is it referring to Muslims as believers? Is it referring to those who are part of the dominant Sunni sect? Does the understanding of *ummah* differ from region to region? For example, do Muslims in Canada think of the *ummah* than Muslims in Asia? Apart from different understandings from offline regions, what about the online world? Is *ummah* thought of differently online?

This dissertation discussed how Islamophobia is an inevitable part of Muslims' lives too. It is no doubt that currently the field of Islamophobia Studies is well established, but digital Islamophobia is a topic that needs to be examined further as we are constantly found emerged into the digital world in our everyday lives. How does Islamophobia present itself online? Given that social media is more interactive than a regular, informative website, how does Islamophobia on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or WhatsApp impact Muslims? Digital Islamophobia – like

other forms of Islamophobia – needs to be combatted at large levels. How can Islamophobia in the online world be controlled?¹⁶³ The internet offers a safe space to everyone and allows anyone to post anything anonymously, and unfortunately this includes hateful and discriminatory agendas. How can anti-Muslim memes and misinformation about Muslims be corrected on the limitless cyberspace? Government agencies and academic associations can fund projects to help fight Islamophobia online. Anti-racist and anti-discrimination organizations could also collaborate with researchers to explore this matter. Muslim-led organizations could also be potentially interested in teaming up with researchers to work on digital Islamophobia.

This chapter outlined findings from this doctoral research project. It offers researchers some avenues for future research projects based on some of the main findings. Much more remains to be studied on Muslims in cyberspace, roles of religious authority in people's everyday lives, Islamophobia both in offline and online spaces, and the factors that contribute to the multiple understandings of a religious identity. Some parts of this research can be disseminated to non-profit organizations and community centers to fight against Islamophobia. The 'convergent space' concept can help researchers understand the fascination and feelings of community and belonging that young Muslims in Canada and the United States long for. Because so much of our daily life is interwind with the online world, a 'convergent space' needs to be essentially recognized and studied further. Conferences like Reviving the Islamic Spirit help navigate spaces of belonging for young Muslims and virtual places play a part in this as well, hence the significance of a 'convergent space' where both the online and offline worlds are

¹⁶³ Cheng (2022) examined the denial of Islamophobia on social media apps, but researchers must explore how digital Islamophobia prospers in online environments and what can be done about it.

brought together. Add in the various options for thinking about different religious authority figures and diversity of Muslims, RIS is a unique space where Muslims can attend to “revive” their Muslim identities – however unique they might be from other Muslims, and this showcases the multiplicity of Muslims.

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GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS

Alhamdulillah – Arabic phrase translating to “praise to be God”; also used when thanking God.

Athan – Islamic call to prayer

Awrah – Intimate parts of the human body that must be covered according to Islamic texts

Ayah – A verse from the Quran

Deen – Quranic term for “religion”

Fatawa – Plural for *fatwa* which are legal Islamic rulings as part of Islamic Law

Ghusl – Act of full body purification

Ijtihad - independent reasoning; process of interpreting religious sources in traditional Islamic jurisprudence

Imam – Title for male graduate of an Islamic institution who serves as the leader of a community and leads prayers

Juz – One of 30 parts in which the Quran is divided

Kitab al-Kafi – Shia hadith collection

Khutbah – Islamic sermon

Miraj – Commonly refers to the story of Prophet Muhammad’s journey to the heavens

Mufti – Title for someone who has graduated from an Islamic institution and has training to announce *fatawa*

Mussallah – Place used for prayer apart from a mosque; prayer mat

Rakah – Act of bowing down in prayer

Salam – Short Islamic greeting meaning “peace”

SAW – Short for *sallallahu alayhi wa sallam* which translates to “peace be upon Him”; commonly said after saying Prophet Muhammad’s name

Shabbe Barat – Islamic festival where some Muslims believe that God forgives all sins

Sunnah – Sayings and acts of Prophet Muhammad

Tafsir – Exegesis of the Quran

Talfiq – Incorporating multiple opinions from different *madhabs* to arrive at one conclusion for a matter

Tariqa – An order or school in Sufi Islam; a spiritual pathway

Ustadh - Refers to a male teacher who has attended an Islamic institution

Ustadha - Refers to a female teacher who has attended an Islamic institution

APPENDICES

1. Participant Overview

The following chart lays out the ages, gender, and religious affiliation for each participant. At the beginning of the interview, they were asked about their age, what gender they identified with, and how they identified religiously.

Participant #	Age	Gender	Self-Religious Affiliation	Participant #	Age	Gender	Self-Religious Affiliation
1	24	M	Sunni	11	33	F	Muslim
2	21	F	Sunni	12	28	F	Muslim
3	21	F	Sunni	13	26	F	Muslim
4	25	F	Muslim	14	25	F	Muslim
5	19	F	Muslim	15	24	M	Sunni
6	23	M	Sunni	16	31	F	Muslim
7	26	F	Muslim	17	19	F	Muslim
8	24	F	Muslim	18	30	F	Muslim
9	35	M	Muslim	19	24	F	Sunni
10	23	F	Muslim	20	32	F	Muslim
Participant #	Age	Gender	Self-Religious Affiliation	Participant #	Age	Gender	Self-Religious Affiliation
21	28	F	Muslim	*31	32	M	Muslim
22	21	M	Muslim	32	28	F	Sunni
23	28	F	Sunni	33	22	F	Sunni
24	33	M	Muslim	34	27	F	Muslim
25	28	F	Muslim	35	25	F	Muslim
26	27	M	Muslim	36	28	M	Sunni
27	24	M	Sunni	37	23	M	Muslim
28	21	F	Sufi/Salafi	38	23	F	Sunni
29	30	F	Muslim	39	30	F	Muslim
*30	29	F	Muslim	40	40	F	Muslim
Participant #	Age	Gender	Self-Religious Affiliation				
41	24	F	Muslim				
42	21	F	Sunni				
43	25	F	Sunni				
44	19	M	Sunni				
45	28	F	Sunni				
46	25	M	Sunni				

47	30	M	Muslim
48	36	M	Muslim
49	24	M	Muslim
50	23	F	Sunni

2. Letter of Information to Organizers

Dear RIS Organizers,

My name is Sana Patel and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting a study for my PhD dissertation and would like to invite young Muslims attending your conference to take part in a research project on studying Muslim Millennials, their use of social media, Muslim identity and participation at RIS. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Lori G. Beaman. This study will be conducted solely in English. Participants will be selected on a first-come first-served basis and their participation is voluntary.

What is the purpose of the study? This research project's aim is to illustrate how media networks are affecting religion in the digital age and how they are impacting the lives of people in the physical world. The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of media events that bring together aspects of online and offline religion in relation to their relationship with Muslim Millennials. This research project exclusively looks at Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS). Participants who meet the following criteria will be recruited: 1) They would self-identify as Muslims who are citizens or permanent resident of Canada or United States, 2) They would fall under the age group of 18-35, 3) The participants would have somewhat of an active online presence with public or private social media accounts, 4) They must attend the RIS conference in Dec 2018 and plan on attending in 2019, and 5) Finally, they would commit to being interviewed at least 2 times (Dec 2018 and Dec 2019). Participants will include both men and women.

What will happen during the study? Participants will be asked to take part in two interviews lasting 30 - 45 minutes. During this interview, they will be asked about their use of social media, questions about religious identity and their experiences and feelings about RIS. These two interviews are one-year apart.

Are there any risks? Participation in this study will entail no foreseeable risks greater than those that participants might face in everyday life. It is not likely that there will be any harms or discomforts from participating in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants can choose to not answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

Are there any benefits? This study gives participants the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and opinions. It also allows them contribute to the scholarship on the study of Muslims and religion in the digital age. The findings from this study will benefit society by filling in the gaps in knowledge about Muslim Millennials, media spaces and events, and the mediatization and individualization of religion in a diverse Canadian society.

What about confidentiality and anonymity? Participants will receive assurance from the researcher that the information they share will remain confidential. Their information will be used only for the research purposes as stated above, and their anonymity will be protected. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Only the principle investigator and her thesis

supervisor will have access to this recording and transcription as well as to any notes taken during the interview. Furthermore, their anonymity will be protected in that their real name will not be used in any reports or presentations based on findings from this research. In all such reports their identity will not be revealed and all information that may identify me will be altered or removed.

What about conservation of data? Data collected, including the audio recording and the transcription, as well as analyses of the data by the researcher and thesis supervisor will be kept in a secure manner, locked in principal researcher's password-protected laptop on a password-protected file. All copies of data will be kept securely for five years after the results of the study have been published, and then will be securely deleted. Upon publication of research results and five-year conservation period has ended, paper copies of research data will be shredded.

What about compensation? Participants will not receive compensation for participation in this research project.

What about study results? Results will be available in 2023 and may be accessed from UOttawa Research through this link: <https://www.ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/242>

Sincerely,

Sana Patel
PhD Student, Religious Studies
Department of Classics and Religious Studies
University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario

3. Consent Form



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Muslim Millennials and Hybrid Media Spaces

Consent Form for Participants

Principal Researcher
Sana Patel, PhD Student
Department of Classics & Religious Studies

Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Lori G. Beaman
Department of Classics & Religious Studies

Invitation to participate: I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research study conducted by Sana Patel. This study is being conducted as part of Sana Patel's PhD project under the supervisor of Dr. Lori G. Beaman.

Purpose of the study: This research project's aim is to illustrate how media networks are affecting religion in the digital age and how they are impacting the lives of people in the physical world. The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of media events that bring together aspects of online and offline religion in relation to their relationship with Muslim millennials. This research project exclusively looks at Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS).

Participation: My participation will entail taking part in two one-on-one interviews lasting 30 - 45 minutes. During this interview, I will be asked about my use of social media, questions about my religious identity and my experiences and feelings about RIS. The first interview is scheduled for _____. It will be audio-recorded. The interviews will be conducted in-person and it will be conducted solely in English. The date for the second interview has yet to be decided. If I cannot be reached for the second interview, my data from the first interview will still be used.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail no foreseeable risks greater than those that I might face in everyday life. It is not likely that there will be any harms or discomforts from participating in this study.

Benefits: I will benefit from this study by having the opportunity to reflect on my religious beliefs and opinions. It will also allow me to contribute to the scholarship on the study of Muslims and religion in the digital age. I understand that the findings from this study will benefit society by filling in the gaps in knowledge about Muslim millennials, media spaces and events, and the mediatization and individualization of religion in a diverse Canadian society.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I share will remain confidential. I understand my information will be used only for the research purposes as stated above, and my anonymity will be protected. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Only the principle investigator and her thesis supervisor will have access to this recording and transcription as well as to any notes taken during the interview. Furthermore, my anonymity will be protected in that my real name will not be used in any reports or presentations based on findings from this research. In all such reports my identity will not be revealed and all information that may identify me will be altered or removed.



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Conservation of data: Data collected, including the audio recording and the transcription, as well as analyses of the data by the researcher and thesis supervisor will be kept in a secure manner, locked in principal researcher's password-protected laptop on a password-protected file. All copies of data will be kept securely for five years after the results of the study have been published, and then will be securely deleted. Upon publication of research results and the end of the five-year conservation period, paper copies of research data will be shredded.

Compensation: I will not receive compensation for participation in this research project.

Voluntary participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, my data will be destroyed, unless permission to use has been granted. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Taharet Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5; (613) 562-5378; Email: ethics@uottawa.ca.

I will keep an electronic copy of this consent form and return another electronic copy as an attachment to Sana Patel at spate161@uottawa.ca, indicating my consent to participate.

Consent

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Ph.D. Student, Sana Patel, at the University of Ottawa which is under the supervision of Professor Lori G. Beaman. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Sana Patel from the University of Ottawa.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- If I participate in an interview, I agree that it can be audio recorded.

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: Sana Patel

4. Recruitment Poster



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY ON

MUSLIM MILLENNIALS & HYBRID MEDIA SPACES

If you are a North American Muslim (between 18-35) who will be attending Reviving the Islamic Spirit Conference in Dec 2018 and plan on attending in Dec 2019, have a social media account, and would like to participate in a study about Muslim identity, use of social media and participation at RIS, please contact Sana Patel (PhD Student, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa)

As a participant, you would agree to be interviewed two times (one-year apart) about your thoughts and experiences regarding RIS 2018 and RIS 2019. This study will be conducted solely in English. Participants will be selected on a first-come first-served basis. Volunteering is optional.

The ethical components of this research project have been reviewed by the UOttawa Research Ethics Board.

**Sana Patel
Principal Researcher, PhD Student**

**Dr. Lori G. Beaman
Thesis Supervisor,
Canada Research Chair in Religious Diversity and Social Change
University of Ottawa**

5. Recruitment Cards



Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

Are you:

Between the ages of 18 and 35?

A citizen or permanent resident of Canada or the United States?

Willing to participate in two interviews that are one-year apart (Skype or in-person)?

Do you:

Have any social media accounts?

If so, I invite you to participate in a research project about Muslim Millennials, social media, Muslim identity and RIS.

If you are interested in participating, please contact:

Sana Patel, PhD Student
Department of Classics and Religious Studies
University of Ottawa

AT

Email:
Twitter:

6. Interview Question Themes and Questions Recruitment Script (Oral)

The interviews will be semi-structured. These themes will be covered in each interview, but the specific questions may vary somewhat depending on how the participant responds. Each interview is estimated to take 30-45 minutes.

Theme 1: Background Information (Demographics)

Theme 2: Social Media Usage

Theme 3: Online Religious Life

Theme 4: RIS Online/Offline Activities

Theme 5: Offline Religious Life

Theme 7: Religious Interests

Theme 8: Religious Identity

Sample Interview Questions

The following are sample questions that will be asked with respect to each theme. Not all these questions will likely be asked of any one participant, and certain additional questions may be asked to probe further issues that the participant may raise in the context of answering these questions

Theme 1: Background Information

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. What is your occupation?
4. Where were you born?
5. Where did you grow up?
6. Are you a citizen/PR of Canada or the US?
7. In which city do you live currently?
8. Do you have any siblings?
9. What is your marital status?
10. What is your highest educational degree?
11. How do you identify religiously?
12. Who do you consult with in regard to religious matters?

Themes 2 + 3: Social Media + Online Religious Life

13. Do you have any social media accounts? Which ones? Are they public or private? If private, why did you choose to make your accounts private?
14. Do you follow or 'like' any religious figures/leaders on these accounts? Who? Why did you choose to follow them?
15. Do you have online friends?
16. Do your friends (online or offline) follow or 'like' the same religious figures/leaders as you on social media? If yes, do you discuss with your friends the posts that these religious figures/leaders post?
17. Does information you find online and the communities you relate to online affect your religious and social practices and beliefs offline?
18. Do you search for religious information online? Why and how often?
19. Have you ever or do you take any religious courses online? Do you plan on doing so?

Theme 4: RIS Offline Activities

20. Are you attending RIS this year? Have you attended it previously and if so, when?
21. How did you find out about RIS?
22. Which RIS activities are you interested in and will be taking part in? Which are you most and least excited about?
23. What made you decide to come to this conference?
24. Are you or will you be posting about your experience at RIS on your social media accounts?
25. What are some things that you hope to achieve from your time at RIS?
26. Please tell me what a day at RIS looks like for you. What time do you arrive? Do you come in time for the first featured speaker or activity? When do you leave? What do you do throughout your day? Do you see family and friends? Do you socialize, visit the bazaar and explore Muslim fashion and food?

27. Are you or will you be taking notes during the lectures? For what reasons? Personal or for educational purposes?

Themes 4 + 5: Offline Religious Lives

28. Will you be going to the conference again? If yes, are you going back for the same reasons? If no, why not? If for different reasons, what caused the change?

29. How has the conference impacted your life? If you believe it has not, what changed do you think it should make?

30. Did RIS help establish any sorts of online friendships or communities that you were not a part of before? If yes, which ones?

31. Did you start following any new religious figures/leaders online that you heard about from the conference? If yes, who and on which platforms?

32. Do you think your use of social media has changed from last year because of RIS? If yes, how?

7. Recruitment Script (Oral)

This oral script will be used when recruitment takes place in person. This text is intended for recruitment at RIS.

Hello,

My name is Sana Patel, and I am a PhD student at the University of Ottawa. I am currently working on my doctoral thesis exploring how Muslim Millennials use social media, how and if they negotiate their Muslim identity and what role RIS plays in this. I am looking for participants to be in this study. Would you be interested in participating in two 30-45 interviews that can take place either in-person or a video call? These two interviews are one-year apart.

If the person demonstrates interest, I will offer a recruitment card and if appropriate, ask them to participate in the interviews with my contact information.

*Revised after interview requirement was changed to only one interview.

Hello,

My name is Sana Patel, and I am a PhD student at the University of Ottawa. I am currently working on my doctoral thesis exploring how Muslim Millennials use social media, how and if they negotiate their Muslim identity and what role RIS plays in this. I am looking for participants to be in this study. Would you be interested in participating in an interview that can take place either in-person or a video call?

If the person demonstrates interest, I will offer a recruitment card and if appropriate, ask them to participate in the interview with my contact information.