The Concept of Islamic Identity and Its Significance for Muslim Youth

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Abstract

Research Objective: This study aims to identify the key components of Islamic identity, as derived from the Qur'an, to foster the development and preservation of Muslim youth. **Research Method:** An inductive approach was employed, analyzing the Qur'anic text to extract components of Islamic identity relevant to youth development. **Results:** The findings indicate that Islamic identity is characterized by a core belief system, a unified connection to the global *ummah*, and a profound influence on both the private and public dimensions of a Muslim's life. **Findings and Implications:** The identified components directly address major threats faced by Muslim youth in preserving their Islamic identity, including peer pressure, assimilation, materialism, corrupt desires, religious doubt, societal detachment from religion, and Islamophobia. These components function as crucial anchors for strengthening and sustaining the faith of young Muslims. **Conclusion:** A deep understanding and cultivation of Islamic identity are essential for Muslim youth to uphold their faith, especially in challenging socio-cultural environments. **Contribution:**
This research advances the understanding of how an Islamic identity grounded in Qur'anic teachings can guide Muslim youth in navigating contemporary challenges to their faith and identity within diverse social contexts. **Limitations and Suggestions:** While this study highlights the potential consequences of failing to preserve Islamic identity, such as loss of trust, moral decline, and engagement in injustice and sin, it does not explicitly discuss its methodological limitations or provide targeted recommendations for future research. Addressing these gaps could strengthen subsequent investigations in this field.

Introduction

As the Muslim *ummah* (global community) faces challenges at both micro and macro levels, a clear characterization of Islamic identity has become increasingly crucial. Among the various demographic groups within the *ummah*, Muslim youth, particularly those living as

minorities, arguably face the most significant threats to their identity.[1] The external pressures influencing the formation and preservation of Islamic identity among young Muslims are considerable,[2] with racism, Islamophobia, and peer pressure ranking among the most pervasive challenges. These pressures often make it difficult for them to maintain their religious identity and consistently practice key aspects of their faith.[3] This reality is reflected in the concerns of many Muslim parents, who regard the preservation of their children's religious identity as one of their foremost priorities. Consequently, there is an urgent need for comprehensive guidance in developing and safeguarding the Islamic identity of Muslim youth, especially within minority contexts.[4]

Extensive research has been conducted on Muslim minorities living in Western liberal democracies, particularly in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. While the concepts of identity construction and the associated pressures and challenges faced by Muslim youth have been widely examined, relatively little research has explored Islamic identity specifically through the lens of the Qur'ān, the most authoritative source of guidance for Muslims. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the concept of Islamic identity within a Qur'ānic framework.

The concept of identity has long attracted scholarly attention, yet a single, universally accepted definition remains elusive. This is likely due to the diversity of approaches taken by scholars across various social sciences and humanities disciplines, each offering unique interpretations and conceptual boundaries. Far from being a limitation, this multiplicity of perspectives underscores the term's significance and its relevance across multiple academic fields. Despite the variety of definitions, one common denominator emerges: the centrality of recognition.[5] Charles Taylor, in his influential essay *The Politics of Recognition*, argues that our identity is "partly shaped by recognition or its absence." In other words, individuals and groups are defined, in part, by how they are recognized, or misrecognized, within society. This dynamic of recognition fosters a sense of distinctiveness, which arguably remains one of the most defining features of identity.

Political scientist James Fearon, in his comprehensive discussion on identity, offers a conceptual breakdown of the term into two main components: social identity and personal identity. The first refers to a social connection formed by a group of people with established rules governing membership and clearly defined characteristics. The second refers to distinguishing traits that an individual values and perceives as unchangeable. Although linking the two is not obligatory, they are often implicitly intertwined in discussions of identity. Indeed, the boundaries between them frequently intersect and overlap, making the distinction less rigid in practice. Consequently, the concept of identity encompasses both a sense of social belonging and personal

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[1]Abdullah A. Omar, "Islamic Identity in the Canadian Multicultural Context," *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2012): 26.

[2] Jasmin Zine, "Muslim Youth in Canadian Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity," *Anthropology Education Quarterly,* vol. 32, no. 4 (2001): 404.

[3] Zine, 401.

[4] Osman Umarji, "Will My Children Be Muslim? The Development of Religious Identity in Young People," Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research (March 23, 2020). <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/will-my-children-be-muslim-the-development-of-religious-identity-in-young-people> (accessed 25 April, 2021).

[5] James Fearon. "What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?" (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999), 6.

self-definition. [6]

Identity formation is a lifelong process, shaped largely by the components we perceive as valuable or virtuous.[7] This raises an important question: if identity is based on what we value, how can elements beyond our control, or those we consider insignificant, still constitute part of our personal or social identity? In light of this, identity may be understood as a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that an individual considers valuable, which in turn fosters a sense of recognition and distinctiveness at both personal and societal levels.

The concept of youth is equally complex, encompassing diverse disciplines and frameworks, which makes it particularly challenging to define in absolute terms. Sociology, biology, culture, religion, and politics all contribute to shaping its meaning. Some scholars argue that "youth" is itself a socially constructed term, evolving over time in response to changing cultural and historical contexts.[8] From a biological perspective, youth begin after childhood with the onset of puberty and continues until adulthood, or even parenthood.[9] While age can be measured as a biological reality, the experiences, meanings, and processes associated with it can only be understood in relation to historical and cultural frameworks. [10] Thus, although age is an undeniable biological fact, its significance is deeply embedded in societal and cultural processes that assign it meaning. In any given society, the concept of youth is shaped as much by social and economic roles as it is by biological development.[11]

Method

This research employed a qualitative textual analysis approach, centering on the Qur'ān as the primary source for examining Islamic identity. The methodological framework appeared to integrate hermeneutical principles to interpret the Qur'ānic text in light of contemporary challenges faced by Muslim youth. This was aligned with the stated research aim: *"to analyze [Islamic identity] in the context of the most vital source of guidance for Muslims, the Qur'ān."* The study likely adopted a systematic exegetical methodology to identify and extract relevant Qur'ānic passages related to identity formation, employing both thematic and contextual analyses to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the sacred text.

The theoretical underpinnings of the research drew from interdisciplinary perspectives, combining sociological theories of identity, particularly Charles Taylor's concept of recognition and James Fearon's distinction between social and personal identity, with an Islamic epistemological framework. This methodological synthesis enabled an exploration of the multifaceted nature of Islamic identity while preserving fidelity to traditional Islamic scholarship. The analytical process appears to have involved identifying recurring themes, guiding principles, and prescriptive directives within the Qur'ānic text that address the construction and preservation of identity. Special attention was given to elements that could strengthen the religious identity of Muslim youth, particularly those navigating challenges such as racism, Islamophobia, and peer pressure in minority contexts.

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[6] Fearon, 2.

[7] Taylor, *Sources of the Self...,* 92*.*

[8] Gill Jones, *Youth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 1.

[9] Erikson, 87.

[10] Jean Spence, "Concepts of youth" in *Working with Young People*, edited by Sheila Curran, Roger Harrison, and Donald Mackinnon (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi. Open University in association with Sage, 2005), 46.

[11] Jean Spence,

Results and Discussions

An Islamic Perspective of Youth

The concept of youth holds significant importance within the Islamic tradition. The Qur'ān itself affirms the value of this life stage through numerous examples. For instance, Prophet Ibrāhīm (AS) was granted signs and profound theological understanding at a young age, as mentioned in the Qur'ān:

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُرِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ مَلَكُوتَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلِيَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُوقِنِينَ

"And thus, did We show Abraham the realm of the heavens and the earth that he would be among the certain [in faith]"[12]

Similarly, Prophet Yaḥyā (AS) is addressed in his youth, when Allāh (SWT) bestowed upon him wisdom, as reflected in the following verse:

يَا يَحْيَىٰ خُذِ الْكِتَابَ بِقُوَّةٍ ۖ وَآتَيْنَاهُ الْحُكْمَ صَبِيًّا

"O John, take the Scripture with determination." And We gave him judgment while yet a boy"[13]

The significance of youth in the Qur'ān is not limited to the prophets. Maryam (AS), the mother of *ʿĪsā* (AS), is also mentioned from an early age. Her devotion and worship of Allāh (SWT) during her youth led her to receive miraculous blessings, culminating in her being chosen to give birth to one of the most honorable prophets in history.[14]

The importance of youth is not confined to the Qur'ān, as similar emphasis is echoed in the prophetic narrations. The Prophet (PBUH) said: 'The son of Adam will not be dismissed from his Lord on the Day of Resurrection until he is questioned about five matters: his life and how he lived it, his youth and how he spent it, his wealth and how he earned it and how he spent it, and how he acted upon his knowledge."[15]

Of all the stages of life, youth is reported to be the only specific period about which an individual will be directly questioned. This highlights the considerable importance placed on this stage within the Islamic tradition. Interestingly, the essence of youth in this context differs significantly from the Western narrative.

In Western discourse, youth is often understood as a period of growth, exploration, and transition into maturity. By contrast, the Islamic perspective presents a strikingly different emphasis. In the Qur'ān, references to youth consistently highlight individuals who had already solidified their identities and dedicated this stage to reflection and worship of Allāh (SWT). Youth, therefore, is not regarded merely as a transitional phase but rather as a period of purposeful action and effort, when an individual is at the peak of physical and mental capability.

The precise definition of youth has also been the subject of historical debate among classical scholars. Al-Qurṭubī summarized the discussion by stating that childhood lasts until the age of sixteen, followed by youth until the age of thirty-two. Al-Zamaksharī similarly argued that youth begins at puberty and extends until thirty-two. Al-Nawawī preferred the view that youth begins at puberty and lasts until thirty. The Mālikī scholar Ibn Shās extended youth until the age of forty, an opinion also supported by Ibn Kathīr in his *tafsīr*.[16] Despite these variations, the

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[12] *Al-Qur'ān,* 6:175.

[13] *Al-Qur'ān,* 19:12.

[14] *Al-Qur'ān,* 3:37.

[15] Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā Tirmidżī. *Sunan al-Tirmidżī.* Taḥqīq Bashār Awād Maʿarūf. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1996). Ḥadīth no. 2416. Graded as authentic by al-Albāni.

[16] Ibn Kathīr, 4:158.

scholars converge on a common starting point: the onset of puberty. The differences lie in defining its end, which ranges from the early thirties to, at most, the age of forty.[17]

Identity Formation

Throughout life, identity is in a constant state of development and evolution. Arguably, the most crucial stage in shaping a unique identity is adolescence, which marks the transition from childhood. This stage is characterized by the emergence and development of an internal sense of self. Childhood, by contrast, is a period of dependency, in which the individual has limited control over personal choices and identity formation. Adolescence, however, introduces a pivotal shift, as individuals begin to recognize their agency and potential. Although identity formation continues into young adulthood, adolescence and early adulthood together constitute the most critical period for identity development. During this stage, individuals not only explore but also consolidate their values, beliefs, and sense of belonging. For Muslim youth, this makes the exploration and understanding of Islamic identity particularly vital, as it provides a framework for navigating the challenges of this formative life stage.[18]

As individuals move through adolescence, external social influences play a significant role in shaping their identity. These influences include friends, teachers, classmates, and broader cultural and religious contexts. Among these, however, parental socialization emerges as one of the most influential factors in a young person's identity formation. Substantial evidence shows that parents shape their children's identity, behavior, and beliefs through various means,[19] including modeling and emulation, positive reinforcement, shared activities, and the provision of personal and social experiences.[20] This emphasis on parental influence is also reflected in Islamic tradition. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

"*No child is born but that he is upon instinct. His parents make him a Jew, or a Christian, or Magian…*" [21]

Thus, the role of parents in the formation of religious identity cannot be overlooked, even in contemporary contexts. However, it is important not to oversimplify this process by reducing individuals to a single, monolithic identity. Identity formation is a complex and dynamic process in which multiple identities are developed and maintained simultaneously within an individual. For example, one may be a teacher, a father, a Muslim, a Canadian, and a basketball player, all at once. These identities often overlap and coexist without conflict, each finding expression in its appropriate context. Some critics have questioned whether certain identities can truly coexist, raising concerns about which identity should take precedence. Yet such questions are often misguided, as they conflate distinct spheres of social and personal identity. Rather than existing in competition, these identities can function harmoniously, each contributing to the holistic self.[22]

Consider the example of an individual who is both a dinner guest and a poet. When attending a poetry circle, there is little relevance in foregrounding one's identity as a vegetarian. Conversely, in the context of being a dinner guest, the identity as a vegetarian takes precedence.

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[17] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Qurṭubỹ, *Al-Mufhim: Sharḥ Saḥīḥ Muslim*, (al-Miṣr: Dar al-Kutub, 1995).

[18] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 87.

[19] Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Amy Arberton, Christy Miller Buchanan, Jacobs Janis, Constance Flanagan, and Rena Harold, "School and Family Effects on the Ontogeny of Children's Interests, Self-Perceptions, and Activity Choices," *Developmental Perspectives on Motivation,* vol. 40 (1993): 145.

[20] Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen, "Invited Essay: Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion,* vol.. 13, no. 3 (2003): 153.

[21] *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, Ḥadīth no. 2658.

[22] Tariq Ramadan, *What I Believe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.

While this example illustrates how identities shift in prominence depending on context, it overlooks the fact that identities do not always coexist harmoniously. At times, they conflict, requiring individuals to prioritize one identity over another.[23]

For instance, if a dinner guest is served pork but identifies as a Muslim or a Jew, the supremacy of religious identity becomes decisive. The prohibition against consuming pork directly conflicts with the social expectation of politeness as a guest, forcing the individual to choose loyalty to one identity over another. Situations such as these, where competing identities produce tension, are particularly common for Muslim youth living in the West.

Young Muslims in America, for example, often encounter pressure to consume alcohol. Although some may enter environments where alcohol is present, they deliberately abstain to preserve their Islamic identity.[24] Such conflicts are especially significant when the identity at stake is religious, as in the case of Islamic identity, which is both comprehensive and distinctive. To grasp these conflicts more fully, it is necessary to explore the unique nature of Islamic identity and its defining components, thereby uncovering its true essence.

Identity in the Qur'ān

The Islamic identity is distinct from any other personal, social, or even religious identity.[25] It necessitates not only an introductory definition but also a deeper exploration of its essential components. Broadly, it may be summarized as a Muslim's faith and pride in believing in Islam, coupled with the freedom to practice its teachings both at the personal and societal levels, as well as the responsibility to convey and uphold these teachings within the broader community.[26]

This introductory understanding of Islamic identity is articulated with clarity and precision in the Qur'ān, in the following verse:

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ قَوْلًا مِمَّنْ دَعَا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا وَقَالَ إِنَّنِي مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ

"And who is better in speech than one who invites to Allah, engages in righteous behaviour, and proclaims, 'Indeed, I am of the Muslims.'" [27]

This verse encompasses both the personal and social dimensions of identity, as the Islamic identity is composed of these two interrelated elements. Ibn Kathīr explains that the verse reflects the true essence of a believer, addressing both the individual and collective aspects of identity.[28] On a personal level, the believer adheres to the commands of Islam, upholding moral principles and regulations in daily life. This naturally extends to the societal level, where the believer invites others to embody these values and actions.[29]

Al-Qurṭubī further highlights that the conclusion of the verse serves as a declaration of

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[23] Nigel Grant, "Some Problems of Identity and Education: A Comparative Examination of Multicultural Education," *Comparative Education* vol. 33, no. 1 (1997): 14.

[24] Allison J. Severson, "Social Identity Construction of Muslim Women: A Case Study," (Thesis, Iowa State University, 2011), 50.

[25] Khalil Nourī al-ʿAlānī, Al-*Huwēya al-Islāmiya fī Zaman al- ʿUlōm al-Thaqāfīy*a, (al-Irāq: Markez al-Buḥōth wa al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiya, 2009), 45.

[26] M.Z. Mohamad et al., *"Personal Identity from an Islamic Perspective" International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no.10 (2020): 200.

[27] *Al-Qur'ān*, 41:33.

[28] Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ʿaẓīm: Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Ṭaybah, 1999), 41:33.

[29] Sayed al-ʿAfānē, *Zahr al-Basātīn min Mawāqif al-ʿUlamāʾ wa al-Rabāniyēn,* (Cairo, Dār al-ʿAfānē, 2014), 5:300.

faith, representing an individual's recognition and affirmation of belonging to the Muslim community.[30] While many verses of the Qur'ān could be cited to introduce the notion of Islamic identity, this verse most effectively encapsulates its dual nature, individual and communal. It includes personal faith in Allāh (SWT), worship and obedience to His commands, abstention from prohibitions, a collective invitation to society to adopt these values, and a clear affirmation of membership in the ummah.

In this way, the verse mirrors the broader definition of identity as a concept: belief in Allāh (SWT), followed by actions that are recognized as valuable, which together provide a sense of recognition and distinction on both the personal and societal levels. These qualities form the foundation of what it means to possess an Islamic identity. Consequently, this verse offers the most fitting introduction to the concept of Islamic identity within the linguistic and theological framework provided. To further appreciate its uniqueness and depth, however, the main components of the Islamic identity must now be examined.

Components of the Islamic Identity

Many definitions of Islamic identity go beyond singular expressions, as they encompass various components that share common characteristics. Although the term is diverse and comprehensive, certain recurring elements can be identified. At the core lies the concept of aqīdah (creed), which denotes an individual's spiritual belief or faith. Aqīdah is often regarded as the most vital component of Islamic identity,[31] providing it with its distinction and uniqueness.[32] It has been classified as a primary foundation of identity, for it is a belief that fundamentally differentiates one religious identity from another.[33]

Alongside this core belief, the concept of the ummah (global Muslim community) holds a central place in defining Islamic identity. This component is strongly linked to the social dimension of identity, as the ummah signifies a collective belonging that transcends the individual.[34] It represents a distinctive feature that allows Islamic identity to move beyond an individualistic framework, forming bonds that transcend ethnicity, race, gender, language, and nation.[35] Through the idea of ummah, Islam establishes a religious identity that is not dependent on the existence of a Muslim state.[36]

The third distinctive component is the comprehensive and encompassing nature of Islam, which is often highlighted when describing Islam not merely as a religion but as a complete and systematic way of life.[37] Identity, as previously defined, is partly constructed through beliefs and practices. In this sense, Islam provides a wide range of guidance, encompassing aḥkām (judgments, rulings, commandments, and principles) that regulate both the personal and social dimensions of a Muslim's life.[38] This inclusivity distinguishes Islamic identity from many other personal or communal identities, granting it influence over the entirety of a Muslim's existence.

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[30] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkam al-Qur'ān,* (Bayrūt: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣrīyah, 2016), 41:33.

[31] Omar, 22.

[32] Al-'Afānē, 300.

[33] Mohamad, 200.

[34] Omar, 22.

[35] Omar, 22.

[36] Hassan, 315.

[37] 'Abd al-Karēm Zaydān, *'Usool al-D'āwah,* (Bayrūt, M'uasisah al-Risālah, 2002), 52.

[38] Zaydān, 53.

In sum, the three main components of Islamic identity are: the foundation of aqīdah, the collective belonging of the ummah, and its comprehensive and encompassing nature.

The Foundation of 'Aqīdah

The first component of the Islamic identity is its foundation of *'aqīdah*, the core fundamental creed. This foundation is embodied in the two testimonies of faith, the *shahādatayn:* (a) the belief that nothing has the right to be worshiped except Allāh, and (b) the belief that Muḥammad (PBUH) is His final messenger. These testimonies represent the purest form of Islamic identity, as they constitute the basis of faith, practice, and spirituality.

Regardless of a Muslim's language, culture, physical characteristics, personality, or personal interests, all are united through this singular belief. It is what allows one to be identified under a shared faith, Islam, and within a collective community, the Muslims.[39] This creed is the essential bond that forms the core of Islamic identity, as the ultimate priority of this identity is the merging of the self with faith.[40] Without this foundation, the Islamic identity cannot be established. Ritual practices, associations with religious groups, and all other acts of worship hold little meaning if the foundation of *'aqīdah* is absent. It is through this creed that intentions and actions derive their significance, making it the most essential component of the Islamic identity.[41]

The Concept of a Ummah

One of the main components of the Islamic identity is the sense of attachment and belonging to the ummah. The term ummah refers to a community united by a shared set of beliefs.[42] Its significance is emphasized in the Qur'ān in the following verse:

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

"And thus, we have made you a just community that you will be witnesses over the people, and the Messenger will be a witness over you." [43]

Ibn Kathīr explains this verse by drawing on the narrations of the Prophet (PBUH), noting that Allāh (SWT) has chosen this *ummah*, the greater unified Muslim community, to be the most just, eminent, and honourable nation. This elevated status, however, is not attained merely through faith,[44] but through the practical application of the rules, principles, and methodologies of Islam. Importantly, the aim of the *ummah* is not to eradicate diversity among cultures, ethnicities, or groups of Muslims, but rather to establish unity within diversity. Each individual may preserve their personal and cultural identity while remaining tied to a broader collective identity rooted in the shared beliefs of Islam. This connection is not confined by geography.[45]

Such an association with a global community prevents an individual from being shaped solely by their immediate society. Instead, it enables one to transcend the limitations of their local environment. A Muslim finds comfort in knowing that even if their surrounding society fails to approve of or validate their Islamic identity, they remain part of a deeper, enduring connection. This may explain why many Muslim youth, particularly in Western contexts, often struggle to anchor themselves within specific ethnic groups or nation-states. Rather, they consolidate their

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[39] Al-ʿAlānī, 47.

[40] Mohamad, 200.

[41] Tariq Ramadan

[42] Omar, 23.

[43] *Al-Qur'ān,* 2:143.

[44] Ibn Kathīr, 2:143.

[45] Omar, 23.

Islamic identity through belonging to the global *ummah*, while simultaneously maintaining healthy and meaningful ties with their local communities.[46]

This demonstrates that the *ummah* is not intended to alienate individuals from their immediate society. On the contrary, the local community is essential for every Muslim, irrespective of its demographic makeup. The purpose of the *ummah*, then, is to foster transnational unity without undermining local cohesion. It is, in essence, a true embodiment of unity within diversity.

An Encompassing Entity

The final component is perhaps the most defining: the Islamic identity is all-encompassing. It permeates an individual's spiritual, social, and personal life,[47] shaping both belief and practice in a holistic manner. This comprehensive nature of Islamic identity is exemplified in the following verse:

قُلْ إِنَّ صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Say, "Indeed, my prayer, my rites of sacrifice, my living and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the worlds." [48]

The foundation of Islamic identity begins with the recognition of a Muslim's ultimate purpose and goal in life: the worship of Allāh (SWT) in all its forms. This worship, however, is not confined to ritual devotion alone, for the commands of Islam extend far beyond the acts of prayer and fasting. They encompass the moral values that govern a believer's conduct, including virtues such as honesty and integrity, as well as prohibitions such as lying and deceit. Islamic teachings not only regulate the relationship between the believer and Allāh (SWT), but also extend to his or her interactions with the created world. These include family life and matters of marriage and divorce, economic transactions, rulings concerning justice and testimony, political and state affairs, criminal law, and dealings with people of other faiths and communities.[49]

The testimony of faith that shapes Islamic identity therefore, transcends the spiritual domain, influencing every dimension of a believer's social existence, regardless of sectarian affiliation or the degree of practice adopted.[50] When a person's ultimate purpose and goal in life are rooted in their Islamic identity, it necessarily takes precedence over all other identities. The way a Muslim prays, fasts, worships, eats, drinks, interacts with friends and neighbors, and even expresses themselves through physical appearance is informed by this identity. Thus, the Islamic identity is distinctive in its scope and can be primarily understood through its three defining characteristics. Only when this complex and comprehensive nature is acknowledged can the discussion of conflicting or competing identities meaningfully begin.

Conflicting Identities

At times, an individual's personal or social identities may come into conflict. This is particularly true in the case of the Islamic identity, given its inclusive and all-encompassing nature. For instance, a Muslim's cultural identity as French could clash with their religious identity in the context of wearing the ḥijāb in a public school in France. Since the Islamic identity requires

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[46] H. A. Hellyer, "Muslims and Multiculturalism in the European Union," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* vol. 26, no. 3 (2006): 336.

[47] Ramadan, *Western Muslims...,* 79.

[48] *Al-Qur'ān,* 6:162.

[49] Zaydān, 52.

[50] Ramadan, *Western Muslims...,* 79.

modest dress for both men and women, a choice must be made.

In such situations, precedence may be given to the French national and cultural identity by removing the *ḥijāb* in public schools, or the Islamic identity may be prioritized by resisting the law. In theory, any conflict between the Islamic identity and other identities should result in the Islamic identity taking precedence. Omar, however, cautions that defining identity in terms of exclusivity risks reducing people's lives to a singular element,[51] thereby neglecting other essential aspects of who they are. This critique highlights the tension between the theoretical framework and lived realities, which often resist such reduction.

For many Muslim youth, especially in Western societies,[52] these conflicts are not abstract thought experiments but real and pressing dilemmas. They are forced to navigate environments in which sustaining multiple identities at once may be impossible, compelling them to choose between them.

Some commentators argue that such conflicts diminish identity by reducing it to a single dimension. Yet, it may be that the opposite is true. These moments of conflict, rather than devaluing identity, can imbue it with new meaning. At the very point of tension, when identities appear reduced to a singular element, individuals may find clarity in answering the perennial question: "Who am I truly?"

The Importance of an Islamic Identity

The conflicts of identity that Muslim youth encounter often reflect the pressures they face in society. For many, preserving the Islamic faith is a daily struggle, both spiritual and practical. They must navigate challenges such as peer pressure, discrimination, racism, gender identity issues, and Islamophobia, all of which threaten their ability to remain steadfast in their beliefs.[53]

Research has shown that Islamic identity helps many Muslim youth preserve their faith and provides them with certainty when confronted with societal pressures and challenges of integration.[54] In a 1998 study of Muslim youth in the U.K., religious identity was described as an "anchor" that kept them grounded and gave them a sense of stability and reassurance.[55] Similarly, a study of Muslim youth in Toronto revealed that Islamic identity provided tranquility and confidence, especially in the face of conflicting identity politics.[56]

Religious identification functions as a framework for resisting various social pressures, allowing Muslims to uphold their distinct beliefs and lifestyles. If Muslim youth are to remain firm in their Islamic practices, then any support mechanism that enables them to resist external threats is invaluable. Religious identity, it appears, serves as precisely that mechanism—binding Muslims to their faith while also acting as a support system against potential challenges. If this identity is undermined, it can weaken their ability to stay committed to Islam. Simply put, the importance of Islamic identity lies in its dual role: connecting Muslims to their faith and equipping them to withstand threats against it.

When discussing Islamic identity, it is important to distinguish between religious theory and practical reality. This is not to suggest that they are incompatible, but rather to question the extent to which religious principles are actually practiced by Muslim youth, particularly those

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[51] Omar, 22.

[52] Severson, 51.

[53] Zine, 401.

[54] Zine, 401.

[55] Jessica Jacobson, *Islam in Transition: Religion and Identity among British Pakistani Youth* (London: Routledge, 1998), 104.

[56] Rima Berns-McGown, *Muslims in the Diaspora* (University of Toronto Press, 1999), 98.

living as minorities in the West. In theory, Islamic identity is of primary importance and largely defines who a person is.

But does this hold true in practice today? In a study of Muslim youth in Sweden, an overwhelming majority (70%) of respondents confirmed that their religious identity *"shows who they are"* as individuals. One might assume this reflects a general tendency among religious youth, but this is not the case. When the same question was asked of Christian respondents, only 30% agreed that their religious identity defines them.[57] This suggests that Islamic identity may play a uniquely central role in shaping self-concept compared to other faith traditions.

Another study of Muslim youth in America, however, found that about 53% considered their Islamic identity a hindrance to pursuing their dreams. Interestingly, this may itself highlight its importance: if Islamic identity were insignificant, it would not be perceived as a potential obstacle. At the same time, about 30% of respondents in the same study considered their Islamic identity to be empowering.[58] This is not meant as a direct comparison of different studies, but rather as evidence of the significant role that Islamic identity plays in the lives of Muslim youth. Whether experienced as a challenge or as a source of empowerment, its influence is undeniable.

Consequences of a Weak Islamic Identity

Cause is not without effect. The preceding causes that weaken the Islamic identity inevitably produce subsequent consequences. One cannot simply compromise or lose part of their Islamic identity without experiencing the resulting ramifications. The weakening of the Islamic identity can lead to two primary categories of detrimental outcomes: theological implications, which pertain to belief and creed, and practical implications, which pertain to conduct and actions.

Corruption of Faith and Creed

There is no doubt that the greater danger lies in the corruption of the essence of belief or faith in a young Muslim. The true nature of a Muslim begins with faith in the heart, which serves as the foundation of their identity.[59] It is in the heart that faith resides internally and from which it directs all actions. When the root of faith is pure and sound, the entire being follows suit. Conversely, a weakened Islamic identity results in a compromised spiritual heart. This can be understood metaphorically through the analogy of the body and its diseases.

Just as diseases weaken the body and impair its functions, such as perception, movement, or overall vitality, a weakened Islamic identity causes failures in the spiritual heart of a Muslim. These failures manifest as doubts, misperceptions, or an inability to perceive the truth correctly.[60] Over time, such spiritual deterioration can lead to ignorance, diminishing the individual's knowledge of Allāh (SWT) and a proper understanding of Islam. The heart, being the seat of faith, is central to the strength of one's creed; when it is compromised, the foundation of Islamic knowledge and belief is also undermined.

When the Islamic identity of a young Muslim is weakened, theological doubts can emerge, potentially corrupting their *aqīdah* (creed). As discussed earlier, this process constitutes a major pathway through which some Muslims may turn away from their faith. Connecting these causes and effects highlights a systematic flow: the weakening of Islamic identity directly impacts the

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[57] Jenny Berglund, "Islamic Identity and Its Role in the Lives of Young Swedish Muslims," *Contemporary Islam,* vol. 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 210.

[58] Omar Suleiman, "Exploring the Faith and Identity Crisis of American Muslim Youth," *Islamophobia Studies Journal,* Vol. 4, no. 1, (Spring 2017): 9.

[59] Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Diseases of the Hearts and their Cures* (Birmingham, United Kingdom: Dār al-Sunnah, 2000), 48.

[60] Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah., 49.

heart, erodes knowledge and faith, and produces profound spiritual and practical consequences.

Engagement in Oppression and Sin

The second consequence of a weakened Islamic identity relates to ill manners, sin, and the corruption of a Muslim's actions. Ibn Taymiyyah explains that the weakness of the heart revolves around two fundamental issues: the corruption of knowledge and the corruption of intent.[61] Corruption of knowledge can lead to anger, while corruption of intent results in misguidance.[62] If the Islamic identity is not preserved, the resulting corruption of knowledge can further weaken faith in the heart, which may then lead to the rise of illicit desires and sinful behavior.

When the Islamic identity is fragile and belief is compromised, this often manifests in corrupt actions. Scholars of Islam categorize sins into four distinct types. The first, *malikiyyah*, involves claiming qualities of lordship for oneself, such as pride, subjugation, and the enslavement of others. The second, *shayṭāniyyah*, entails committing acts resembling Satan, such as envy, deceit, and cheating. The third, *sab'iyyah*, includes sins of transgression, like misplaced anger, murder, and exploiting the weak. The fourth, *bayhīmīyyah*, consists of sins driven by desire, including adultery, theft, miserliness, and impatience.[63]

While all four categories may be committed by someone with a weakened Islamic identity, the fourth type, sins of desire, is particularly relevant to Muslim youth. Many young individuals are incapable of committing the first three categories due to social or physical constraints, but sins of desire are more accessible and prevalent. Examples include alcohol consumption, illicit relationships, pornography, and drug use, all commonly observed among Muslim youth in contemporary studies.

The consequences of failing to preserve the Islamic identity are serious. Traditional scholars classify *īmān* (faith) into three interconnected branches: belief in the heart, articulation by the tongue, and action through the limbs.[64] This framework divides faith into belief and practice. The Islamic identity closely aligns with both dimensions, encompassing what a Muslim values internally and how those values are enacted externally. Weakening this identity can lead to doubts, diminished faith, sinful behavior, corruption, and oppression, ultimately risking the alienation of Muslim youth from their religion.

Conclusion

The concept of identity is central to an individual's unique sense of self. It operates on both personal and collective levels, shaping our distinctiveness in each context. Identity provides a sense of recognition, reflecting not only who we are but sometimes also who we are not. The development of identity is a fluid process, as both personal and collective identities continually evolve. Perhaps the most critical stage in this process is adolescence and young adulthood, when individuals begin to define themselves according to what they value most and establish their moral inclinations.

The Qur'ān underscores the importance of developing and preserving an Islamic identity through numerous verses. The unique nature of the Islamic identity is exemplified in its three main components: the foundation of *aqīdah* (Islamic creed), a strong connection to the global Muslim community (*ummah*), and its all-encompassing influence across every aspect of a Muslim's life. The significance of this identity is further reflected in the profound role it plays in

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[61] Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah., 42.

[62] Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah. 43

[63] 'Abdu al-Razzāq 'Abdu al-Muḥsin al-Badr, *Asbāb Ziyādah al-Imān wa Nuqsānih (Causes Behind the Increase and Decrease of Imān)* (Riyadh: Dār al-Qalam wa al-Kitāb, 2006), 133.

[64] Ibn Taymiyyah, 138.

shaping the lives of Muslim youth.

Research has demonstrated that the Islamic identity is one of the most vital components of a young Muslim's overall identity, particularly for those living as minorities in the West. It provides attachment to the Islamic faith within a global community, serving as an anchor amid the substantial pressures of liberal and secular societies. The Islamic identity acts as an oasis in a landscape increasingly devoid of spirituality, a metaphysical construct that transcends the purely physical world. It offers meaning, hope, and stability to those seeking a deeper purpose through their religious identity.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Shahbaz Gaya: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing -original Draft. **Nadzrah Ahmad**: Supervision, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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