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# Examining The Mental Health Experiences of LGBTQ+ Identifying Muslim Students in Ontario's Post-Secondary Institutions

Bushra Ahmed
ahme0424@mylaurier.ca

**Examining The Mental Health Experiences of LGBTQ+ Identifying Muslim Students in**

**Ontario's Post-Secondary Institutions**

**By Bushra Ahmed**

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**<u>Committee Members</u>**

**Dr. Maryam Khan and Dr. Ginette Lafrenière**

**Land Acknowledgment**

I would like to acknowledge with respect that the Wilfrid Laurier University operates on the traditional territories of the Neutral, Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. This region is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe peoples, which represents the commitment and agreement to share, protect resources and avoid engaging in conflict. From the official Wilfrid Laurier University land acknowledgment statement, this territory is described in the following as:

*From the Haldimand Proclamation of Oct. 25, 1784, this territory is "six miles deep from each side of the river (Grand River) beginning at Lake Erie and extending in the proportion to the Head of said river, which them and their posterity are to enjoy forever." The proclamation was signed by the British with their allies, the Six Nations, after the American Revolution. Despite being the largest reserve demographically in Canada, those nations now reside on less than five per cent of this original territory*. (Wilfrid Laurier University 2023).

The Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University is located on the Haldimand Tract, which comprises the so-called city of "Kitchener." As a student of the Master of Social Work program, I have gathered on this land both physically and virtually for the past two years, and have engaged in academic, research, and community building initiatives. As a settler-immigrant, I would like to sincerely acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Indigenous, First Nations and Métis peoples across the Turtle Island, in protecting and healing the land for thousands of years.

Currently, I live, work and connect with others on the unceded territories of the of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabek, and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nations, which comprises the city of Toronto or *Tkaronto* (Mohawk word which translates to 'the place in the water where the trees are standing') (Johnson 2013). As a settler-immigrant who has been residing on the Turtle Islands for the past ten years, I recognize the many privileges, most of which are unearned, that I experience as a settler. I am committed to unlearning my biases and relearning what it means to engage in relational accountability, honoring the original agreements of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty, as well as that of the Two Row Wampum Belt (Muller 2007), which signifies the peaceful and collaborative co-existence of Indigenous and settler communities. As a social worker, I also recognize the importance of using my professional privileges and platform to aid in addressing the Calls to Action set forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the unique mental health experiences of Ontario's LGBTQ+ Muslims in post-secondary settings. The study looks at how LGBTQ+ Muslim students' mental wellness (i.e., sense of belonging, feeling affirmed in their intersecting identities of being Muslim and belonging to LGBTQ+ community) is affected as they try to navigate systemic barriers and make space for themselves in various settings (i.e., academic, LGBTQ+ affirming spaces, Muslim-specific spaces, student services) on campuses in Ontario, Canada. The study sample consists of four LGBTQ+ identified Muslim students across post-secondary institutions in Ontario and participants discussed their emotional, mental, and sense of belonging experiences on campus. Participants provide suggestions on improving the available support offered through their institutions. Key results from the thematic analysis of data suggest that the participants' mental health are negatively impacted due to experiencing exclusion at various levels at educational institutions and such experiences impact their identity as LGBTQ+ Muslim students. Furthermore, institutions offer limited supports and resources. As a result, LGBTQ+ Muslim students seek resources outside of campuses, as well as peer support, to cope with these experiences of exclusion and sense of "unbelonging." Additionally, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTQ+ Muslim students experience both positive and negative outcomes, such as loss of access to in-person communities on campus and connecting with other LGBTQ+ Muslims across the globe via online platforms. Participants recommend that culturally competent training for staff and faculty at these institutions be applied to create more inclusive and accessible spaces on campus.

*Keywords*: LGBTQ Muslims, Mental Health, Higher Education, LGBT Mental Health

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**Introduction**

LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other sexual orientation and gender-diverse identities under the Queer and Trans umbrella) individuals often have to navigate challenges in cis-heteronormative settings, such as educational institutions, which may result in negative impacts on their mental health and well-being. In this study, the term cis-heteronormative has been defined to address the belief system that existence cis-gender and heterosexuality, along with its association at individual, familial, political, and social levels are considered to be 'default' or 'normal' (Amherst College, n.d.). As a result, in a world that is designed with cis-heteronormativity in mind, those LGBTQ+ identities may experience exclusion and face discrimination. LGBTQ+ identities struggle to find footing in many dominant religious spaces, including mainstream Muslim settings such as mosques, community centers and social groups including families, peers, and larger Muslim communities. In this study, the term 'Muslim' has been used to refer to the ethnocultural identity of those raised in communities where major holidays and religious traditions of Islam are celebrated, as well as immigrating from Muslim majority nations, which may or may not include individuals who also practice Islam religiously (Masud et. al 2009). Traditional schools of thought in dominant Abrahamic religions, including Islam, forbids marriage of two people of the same sex (Minwalla et.al 2005), and a 2017 world survey by Carroll and Mendos found that same sex relationships are a criminal offence in many Muslim majority countries. Although inclusive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community can be found in North America and across Europe, there is often a struggle for LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim individuals to fit into either their religious or queer communities. This is because of laws and policies put in place by the governing bodies and/or religious leaders in these nations, which criminalizes acts associated with homosexuality (Shah 2016; Hildebrandt

2015; Thajib 2022). In the recent years, research on LGBTQ+ Muslims has been conducted to identify their experiences of navigating their culture (Siraj 2012; Javaid 2020), adapting to fit into these spaces (Maulod 2021), and the emotional and mental toll it takes to navigate these spaces (Alvi and Zaidi 2021). LGBTQ+ affirming religious organizations play an integral part in creating a safe, confidential, and secure setting that allows for LGBTQ+ Muslims to build community connections and practice their faith (Golriz 2021). Although there is existence of such organizations in metropolitan areas like that of Toronto, Ontario (where the study takes places), many LGBTQ+ Muslims may not have been able to access these resources due to location, proximity, and availability of in-person vs. online events.

Within a post-secondary context, LGBTQ+ students have found themselves experiencing microaggressions (i.e., homophobia in many settings, whether it is through casual remarks or verbal/physical attacks, lack of inclusive policies), which led to worsened mental health and low self-esteem (Taylor et. al 2020). This experience may be intensified when intersectional identities come into play, such as race, religion, economic, and political status (Riggle et al 2021; Moore et. al 2021). For LGBTQ+ Muslim students in North American public colleges and universities, this can mean experiencing exclusion in both LGBTQ+ spaces due to their faith and in faith-based spaces due to their orientation. Examining such experiences is important not only to facilitate better inclusivity, but also to promote acceptance at the self, community, and policy levels.

LGBTQ+ students' mental health experience in post-secondary settings is a well-researched topic (Taylor et. al 2020; Gnan et.al 2019; Seelman, Woodford, and Nicolazzo 2017); however, there is limited literature available in social work on how Muslim LGBTQ+ students navigate their post-secondary journeys. Furthermore, mental health experiences of LGBTQ+

Muslims, in accessing community, health and social services, is an emerging topic and offers limited understanding. Specifically, it is not known how LGBTQ+ Muslim students experience discrimination while pursuing post-secondary studies, how it impacts their mental wellness, and if there are culturally competent supports available for these individuals. Therefore, to address these research gaps, this study examined how the mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims are shaped by the quality of services offered by the student experience offices in post-secondary institutions, which includes their experience in academic settings (e.g., classrooms) and spaces dedicated to student services, such as student groups, wellness centers, and faith-based spaces on campus. Furthermore, how post-secondary experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslim students impact their mental health, in relation to their sense of belonging on campus, how they make meaning of their intersecting identities in light of these experiences, and the types of support available to cater to the needs of LGBTQ+ students on campus have been examined. Lastly, since this study took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it took into consideration how participants' access to community were impacted as a result of it. Participants reported mixed responses, they noted loss of in-person community, but increased exposure of LGBTQ+ Muslims across the globe, leading to the formation of new friendships and connections.

Overall, the purpose of this study was to highlight the experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims navigating their post-secondary journeys in North America, and implementing findings and participant recommendations in delivering improved, accessible, and culturally competent services across postsecondary institutions and beyond. The findings of this study are relevant to student life professionals, policy makers, administrators, and service providers within post-secondary institutions.

       This study is also relevant to social work educators, social service providers across post-secondary institutions and social service organisations, including social workers. Social workers may work with LGBTQ+ Muslims in areas related to mental health care, immigration, student policy, equity initiatives, as well as academic environments and student services. The findings from this study can offer a better cultural understanding for social work practitioners about the unique challenges LGBTQ+ Muslims experience, as well as providing insight for policy makers and program developers to create more accessible, culturally informed resources and policies for marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals on and off-campus.

**Positionality**

My motivation to pursue this research project lies within my personal experience as a settler-immigrant, racialized, neuroqueer, and Muslim individual who had difficulty tackling their own post-secondary experience.

I reflect on my roles both as a social work researcher and an LGBTQ+ Muslim who worked with other LGBTQ+ Muslims in this research project. I was raised in a Sunni majority community and were not too familiar with the diverse sects and schools of thought present in the wider Muslim community. My lived experience as a LGBTQ+ Muslim and lack of community support in the past have influenced in internalized Islamophobia. Therefore, I engaged in critical reflexivity, discussed these biases with my peers and supervisors. I remained curious during the interview process and noted down the unique experiences of the participants who came from diverse backgrounds. During this research project, which overlapped with my masters' program, I actively engaged in anti-racist and decolonizing frameworks. I credit this process of 'unlearning' and 'relearning' through courses on ethical social work and Indigenous relational accountability taught by racialized and Indigenous instructors at Wilfrid Laurier University.

For this research project, I worked with LGBTQ+ Muslim participants. Although LGBTQ+ issues are incorporated into social work education as a means to de-mystify and create cultural competence among social work students, these issues are often highlighted as being 'othered. 'Othering' is a process where issues experienced by marginalized groups are viewed as deterring from what is considered 'normal' (Hicks 2008; Vinjamuri 2017). In case of navigating LGBTQ+ issues, heteronormativity and heterosexism may not be addressed in social work classrooms, leading to more covert attitudes and general discomfort among social work students (Vinjamuri 2017). Furthermore, Hicks (2008) noted how social work is complicit in perpetuating

heteronormativity by highlighting sexuality for certain populations, othering LGBTQ+ communities by labelling them as 'sexual types', rather than recognizing that all individuals are 'implicated in the social construction of sexuality'. Additionally, many social workers providing mental health care may refer to the DSM-V and work in conjunction with other mental health professionals. The DSM considered homosexuality as a form of mental disorder historically, with the term being removed in 1973 (Drescher 2015). Although mental health counselling has since removed itself such archaic portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals, harmful interventions such as conversion therapy has only been banned in January 2022 (Egale 2023), and there has been a rise of anti-trans and homophobic sentiment across North America (O'Connor 2021; Smith 2020). Therefore, as social workers, it is not only important to provide culturally relevant care to our LGBTQ+ clients, but also to use our positionality and power to advocate for these communities.

In this research study, in addition to my personal experience, I drew upon my previous experience of conducting community-based participatory research and social psychology research. Engaging in these research modalities helped me understand the systemic barriers students on campus were experiencing, and work on incorporating their feedback to improve existing services. These experiences helped me understand the importance of culturally competent social services and how it can provide a positive experience to its service users. Additionally, they helped me recognize the importance capturing lived experiences through qualitative research methodology and learn about how the rich, complex, and nuanced stories of individuals can help improve upon resources and supportive care for marginalized communities. Furthermore, my proximity to various LGBTQ+ organizations located in the city of Toronto and

professional ties to the University of Toronto, provided solid foundations to jumpstart the

research project.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This research article is informed by two theoretical models: the minority stress model (MSM) and intersectionality. How each of these frameworks inform the foundations of the research manuscript is discussed below:

*The Minority Stress Model*

The Minority Stress Model, coined by Meyer (2003) describes how an individual experiencing discrimination (at systemic, interpersonal, and institutional levels) may experience poor health and well-being outcomes, specifically if they occupy marginalized identities (David 2014; Meyer 2015). Meyer (2003) built on this theory based on the idea that belonging to socially stigmatized or minority categories can lead to increased experiences of stress and mental health pressures for individuals belonging to those social groups. The minority stress model framework has been chosen for this study due to its legitimacy in measuring the mental and physical health disparities of LGBTQ+ populations. This framework acted as a foundation of majority of studies conducted on mental health disparities experienced by LGBTQ+ communities (Borgogna and Aita 2023). The stressors associated with poor mental health outcomes include discrimination, internalized homophobia, concealing sexual orientation, and victimization (Michaels et. al 2016; Mohr and Fassinger 2000; IOM 2011). Additionally, minority stress model has been used in previous research to understand the lived experiences of heterosexism, internalized stigma, and resilience of LGBTQ+ Muslims (Khoir 2020; Henry 2020; Etengoff and Rodriguez 2022). Examining participants' experience of exclusion within the context of minority stress requires the implementation of research methods that allows for in-depth and nuanced understanding. This can be achieved using qualitative research methods, which enables participants to provide detailed descriptions of how they experienced minority

stress and its impacts on their mental well-being (Rood et. al 2016; Matsuno et. al 2022; Harkness et. al, 2022). Therefore, in the context of the research study, the minority stress model applied to the population of interest, given that Muslim LGBTQ+ individuals occupy three identities of minorities in North America: that of a religious minority and racial and sexual diverse identity within their religious circles and heteronormative settings. As a result, they may experience increased mental health distress, due to encountering discrimination and victimization based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, and belonging to a religious minority community in North America. These experiences may result in their identities clashing with one other, due internalized homophobia and Islamophobia, and lead to experiencing distressed mental health

### *Intersectionality*

Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, which describes one's experience of the world influenced by the multiple identities they hold, has been incorporated in this study. These multiple identities can subject an individual to both systemic oppression and privileges simultaneously. Considering the experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims, their identities are intersectional in nature (Rahman 2010), as they belong to a religious identity while simultaneously holding sexually diverse identities. Occupying these multi-faceted identities creates a unique lived experience for them, as they have to navigate their sexuality in heteronormative and patriarchal spaces within the dominant Muslim communities; while practicing their faith in homonormative spaces, where religious practice may be frowned upon, since these spaces are secular in nature. Moreover, Muslim identities are racialized in the West, where those aligned with Islam experience Islamophobia in various white-majority and secular settings, including homonormative spaces (Rahman and Valliani 2016).

Therefore, racial identities could also contribute to LGBTQ+ Muslim's experiences. Depending on their cultural identities, their diverse sexuality can be either welcomed or resisted. This is associated with heteronormative and patriarchal standards in those communities, as well as the long-term effects of colonization, which significantly contributed to establishing these standards. Intersectionality theory has been chosen for this study as LGBTQ+ Muslims' sexual orientation and gender identities, in addition to their cultural and religious identity as Muslims, are not separate, rather intertwined with one another (Rahman 2010). Occupying multiple identities of sexual orientation, gender, cultural and religious affiliations, as well as diverse ethnicities, create complex experiences for LGBTQ+ Muslims, where these facets interact with one another and impact their perspectives and ways of being. Specifically, belonging to religious and ethnic minority communities may lead to LGBTQ+ Muslims experiencing discrimination within LGBTQ+ affirming spaces, as white supremacist and heteronormative ideologies still bleed into so-called 'inclusive' spaces. Therefore, intersectionality framework has been incorporated in this study to identify the ways in which multiple identity facets of participants interact with another and influence their mental health experiences. Rahman and Valliani (2016) described how LGBTQ+ Muslim identity is not a 'mutually exclusive' issue, rather an intersectional one, given that LGBTQ+ Muslims are navigating Islamophobia, homophobia in their communities, and a 'monolithic' understanding of LGBTQ+ identity, given these identity facets are founded on western experiences. Furthermore, the authors noted how LGBTQ+ Muslim identity was not confined to either eastern or western influences, rather it was formed at the intersection of 'LGBT political identity' and that of ethnic and religious identities. As a result, this intersection potentially challenged and disrupted both sides of the 'cultural divide.'

Similar to Minority Stress Model, incorporating intersectional framework to this research study required the need for employing research methods that effectively capture the complex and varied experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims who navigate the intersections of multiple oppressed identities and social positions (Abrams et. al 2020), which was possible through implementing qualitative research methodology. Engaging in intersectional qualitative methodology in this study produced a more comprehensive portrayal of marginalized identities (Abrams et. al 2020), i.e. LGBTQ+ Muslims' postsecondary experiences and the factors contributing to them. This allowed for the identification of service gaps present in the institutions, as well as offer potential for culturally competent solutions.

The chosen frameworks contextualized the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims in relation to their sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural and religious affiliation with Islam, as well as their racial and ethnic identity. The minority stress model framed their experiences of discrimination due to belonging to sexual and gender diverse groups and how it impacted their mental health. Applying intersectionality framework allowed for consideration of LGBTQ+ Muslims' racial, ethnic identities, as well as their social locations, and how all these identity facets interacted with one another, and shaped their lived experiences. These frameworks explained how LGBTQ+ Muslims made meaning of their identity and charted their own path of reconciliation when opposing parts of their identity interacted with one another, allowing all parts of their identity co-exist with one another.

**Literature Review**

***LGBTQ+ Mental Health and Intersectionality***

In this thesis manuscript, 'mental health' is defined as an expansive term that includes the mental well-being and health outcomes of individuals with intersecting identities. The focus of this study is the mental health outcomes of the LGBTQ+ Muslim community. The term 'LGBTQ+' has been chosen to include the diverse sexual orientations and gender identities that exist under the Queer and Trans umbrella. The '+' sign has been used to signify asexual, intersex, non-binary and gender non-conforming identities, which have been historically excluded and provided limited representation. In relation to the theoretical frameworks described previously, the concept of LGBTQ+ mental health in this study drew its definition from intersectionality theory and minority stress model. Intersectionality played a role in LGBTQ+ mental health due to the differing sexual orientation and racial identities of both the study participants and the broader LGBTQ+ community, and how these identity categories interacted with one another and influenced LGBTQ+ individuals' mental well being and experience of mental distress. Furthermore, in relation to minority stress model, members of the community experienced increased stressors due to their identity as a sexual minority, and often needed to carve out their own path to survive and thrive in cis-heteronormative societies. LGBTQ+ individuals encountered increased stress and poor mental health as they navigated cis-heteronormative spaces, and subjected to microaggressions in their work, school, and public settings. Additionally, intersectional identities such as race, religion, and class played a significant role in the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Walubita et. al 2022).

Race, ethnicity, religiosity, and spirituality must be accounted for when we consider intersecting identities and LGBTQ+ mental health to accurately support racialized LGBTQ+

individuals. The concept of 'mental health' and 'mental illness' can vary across geography and diverse cultures. Furthermore, many cultural communities may experience shame and social stigma while seeking mental health support, as it can be perceived as a sign of 'weakness' of either character or their faith, and/or a test from religious deities (prompting individuals to seek help from religious leaders who may not be equipped to provide mental health support) (Alhomaizi et. al 2018; Youssef and Deane 2006; Mclaughlin, Ahmad and Weisman de Mamani 2022). Additionally, LGBTQ+ individuals may face further discrimination due to stigma and superstition associated within their communities, such as a sign of punishment from God or being possessed by evil spirits (Nyashanu, Ganga, and Chenneville 2022), which may lead to further ostracization from their community and worsened mental health (Rudert, Janke, and Greifeneder 2021). Therefore, mental health issues arise as a consequence of different intersecting oppressions experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals.

Racialized LGBTQ+ students and trans/non-binary individuals experienced heightened hypervigilance leading to negative mental health outcomes (Riggle et. al 2021). LGBTQ+ racialized students required additional support from their mental health care provider to navigate their intersecting identities (Moore et. al 2021). Although spiritual and religious practice can positively promote mental health, the relationship between religion and LGBTQ+ identity can be more complex, rendering both positive and negative outcomes. Warlick, Lawrence, and Armstrong (2021) emphasized the need for practitioners to be conscious of their own biases and encouraged acceptance in both religious and healthcare settings to better support LGBTQ+ individuals. Furthermore, practitioners must perform trauma-informed care to effectively support LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health (Levenson, Craig, and Austin 2021).

***Exploring the LGBTQ+ Muslim Identity***

LGBTQ+ identities, also struggled to find their footing in certain mainstream religious spaces, including Islam. Although inclusive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community can be found in various countries across the globe, LGBTQ+ Muslims have to navigate their intersectional identity as belonging to a dominant religious group and identifying with non-heterosexual identities. There is often a struggle for them to fit into either LGBTQ+ positive spaces or meet the heteronormative and patriarchal standards of their cultural communities. Research informs that LGBTQ+ Muslims navigated this intersecting identity by making compromises on their emotional and mental health (Alvi and Zaidi 2021) to navigate their culture (Siraj 2012; Javaid 2020) and adapting to fit into hetero and homonormative spaces (Maulod 2021). Furthermore, on multiple studies conducted with lesbian and gay Muslims, it was found that they used alternative interpretations of religious teachings, found alternative paths to practice their religion and also belong to LGBTQ communities (Khan and Mulé 2021; Minwalla Rosser, Feldman and Varga 2005; Siraj 2012; Rahman and Valliani 2017). In LGBTQ+ dominant spaces, there are specified hegemonic norms that can create additional pressure on LGBTQ+ Muslims. This includes pressure to come out, tokenization/fetishization due to their ethnicity, being targeted as the "hateful other" etc. (Kehl 2020). The culture of 'coming out' is subjective for LGBTQ+ Muslims, as it depends on specific contexts and their intersecting identities, therefore these individuals may find themselves living neither in nor out of the closet (Liinason 2019). However, there are community-based organizations that support these individuals and provide spaces to navigate their sexual orientation in a culturally competent setting.

Although existing research on LGBTQ+ Muslims is focused on navigating personal and social relationships, there is limited research to understand how they navigate specific settings such as the workplace, academia, social services, and community spaces that are cis-heteronormative. In the context of higher education, many post-secondary institutions' wellness and leadership programming is based on the tenets of social work research, and the social workers within these institutions provide supports related to student health and well-being. However, in context of LGBTQ+ Muslim students in academia, there is limited literature on how these supports are modified to aid their academic experience.

### *LGBTQ+ Mental Health in Post-Secondary Settings*

Mental health impacts of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals in navigating workplace and academia has been thoroughly researched, and informed workplaces and post-secondary institutions to update their policies and services to best cater to these individuals. LGBTQ+ students experience microaggressions (i.e., homophobia), which lead to worsened mental health and low self-esteem (Taylor et. al 2020). LGBTQ students in post-secondary institutions (colleges and universities) tend to experience homophobia through microaggressive behaviours and heteronormative campus climates. Based on a UK study on 1948 university and college students, LGBTQ+ students were prone to higher suicide, self-harm, and other mental health risks, and this amplified when the participants were either transgender or non-binary, female-identifying, or bisexual (Gnan et.al 2019). Exposure to LGBTQ+ microaggression led to higher levels of stress and anxiety, and gender identity (i.e., being trans) can further impact self-esteem and victimization (Seelman, Woodford, and Nicolazzo 2017). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ students with disabilities experienced ableism in postsecondary settings, such as discrimination, harassment, and offensive behaviour compared to their LGBTQ+ peers without disabilities,

which contributed to feelings of exclusion and mental distress (Brckalorenz et. al 2020).

LGBTQ+ students with disabilities were subjected to ableism by their peers, faculties, and

institutions themselves, in the form of microaggressions, lack of safe and inclusive spaces, and

inability of faculty to intervene discriminatory events in the classroom (Miller 2018). Lastly,

LGBTQ+ students may encounter cis-heteronormativity on campus in the form of

microaggressions via exclusionary policies, structural discrimination (e.g. lack of access to

gender neutral washrooms), and hostile institutional environments (Woodford et al 2018). As

consistent with aforementioned studies, the participants in the Woodford et al (2018) study also

experienced worsened mental health outcomes because of these discriminatory experiences.

Therefore, intersecting identities of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and disability amplified

these stressors and lead to greater mental distress. Services dedicated to catering to these

students, such as gender and sexual diversity centres, gay students' associations, etc. could help

mitigate these stressors.

Despite the ongoing research of LGBTQ+ post-secondary students' experience of

microaggressions, there is limited research for Muslim LGBTQ+ students, specifically on what

the experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims are like, how it impacts their mental health and how

LGBTQ+ affirming student services support these students. This study examined how the mental

health experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying Muslims are shaped by their post-secondary journey,

which included peer-to-peer interactions, faculty, and staff support, as well as resources available

to support 2SLGBTQ+ students on campus.

The following research questions have been incorporated in the study to reflect the

identified research gaps:

    a. What are LGBTQ+ Muslims' experiences in navigating academic and LGBTQ+ affirming spaces on campus?

    b. How do these experiences impact LGBTQ+ Muslims' sense of well-being and belonging on campus?

## Method

### *Research Design*

The study methodology was qualitative in nature, as it collected data through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative approach was chosen as it best fit the scope of the research project, to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims in post-secondary settings and how these experiences impacted their mental health. This approach was taken as it allowed for capturing the participants' experience (Campbell et. al 2021). Choosing quantitative measures would have limited the participants to be able to fully discuss their experiences, therefore following the semi-structured interview format allowed the conversation to flow naturally between the participants and interviewer, while providing a sense of guidance that explored the proposed research questions in-depth. Prior to recruitment of participants, materials such as interview guide, demographic questionnaire, promotional materials, and email templates were submitted to the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board for approval. The ethical clearance for the study were issued by the board on October 31st, 2023 (REB #8305).

### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited online using snowballing techniques, as the sample of the study was a hard-to-reach community (Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljae 2017). An Instagram account

was created, which contained a poster of the research study. The Instagram post was shared both on its' 'Stories' platform, as well as the researcher's personal Instagram account. The Queer Muslim Network of Toronto, which is a social group created for LGBTQ+ Muslims in Southern Ontario, played a pivotal role in the advertisement of the study on their social media platforms, and in the recruitment of participants. Furthermore, local community organizers with personal ties to the researcher of this project also shared about the project on their social media platforms. Potential participants were vetted by asking if they met the eligibility criteria of the study. Although original plans included connecting with the sexual and gender diversity offices of Ontario's public universities and colleges, student run LGBTQ+ organizations, and LGBTQ+ Muslim community organizations (e.g., Queer Muslim Network of Toronto). Ultimately, almost all participants were recruited via the Queer Muslim Network of Toronto, and one participant from the author's academic cohort volunteered to participate in the study.

### *Sample and Procedures*

The study sample consisted of four LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim students across public colleges and universities in Ontario. The province was chosen due to its largest representation of Muslim population in Canada (Statistics Canada 2015). Although there was a greater interest from community members to participate in the study, many did not meet the eligibility criteria or could not provide availability during the time period in which the interviews were held (between November and December 2022).

For the study, participants had to meet the following eligibility criteria:

- Attended a public post-secondary institution in Ontario, or recently graduated in the last 3 years (graduated in year 2019 or later; as data gathered within past three years may accurately represent the current campus culture)

- Identified with or questioning; LGBTQ+ identities. These identities include but not limited to: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Asexual, Intersex, Trans (including but not limited to transgender, non-binary, agender, bigender, trans feminine, trans masculine, gender-queer, gender-fluid) identities.

- Identified as Muslim (multidimensional such as culturally, religiously, spiritually etc.); does not need to practice Islam.

- Were either permanent resident, citizen or resided in Ontario in the duration of their study

- Had their mental health impacted (positive or negative experiences) due to access to services within the university's student affairs or LGBTQ+ specific departments/resource centres, interactions with peers or faculty members within the university setting

Prior to the interview, participants filled out a survey answering basic demographic questions, such as age, gender, and sexual orientations, ethnicity and the highest level of education achieved. The online survey was provided to participants prior to the scheduled interview, and participants also had the opportunity at the beginning of the interview to fill out the survey. In the interview, questions around the mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying and gender-diverse Muslim students were asked. The study sample consisted of LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim students (both enrolled and graduated as recently as 2020) across public colleges and universities in Ontario. Participants were also asked for suggestions to improve the available supports offered through the university.

Once participants met the inclusion criteria, they provided their school email address and institutional information for receiving financial compensation. The participants were provided financial compensation of $25 in the form of an Amazon or President's Choice gift card. Participants who consented to member checking received an additional $10 in compensation, in the form of Amazon or President's Choice gift card. All participants participated in the main interview, as well as the member checking interviews.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

For the project, the interviews were conducted over Zoom for Healthcare, and each interview was audio recorded. Next, the interviews went through a two-step transcription process. First, the audio files were transcribed using a secure transcription software, Rev (Kokotov et. al 2010), which used a secured encryption process while transcribing the audio files. Afterwards, the researcher listened to the audio recordings and edited the transcripts for words the software did not accurately transcribe. If the participant declined to have their interview recorded, handwritten notes would have been taken throughout the interview to capture the participants' experience. However, all participants consented to having their interview audio recorded.

Following the transcription process, the interview transcripts were cleaned up to omit any identifying information, such as the participants' names, their post-secondary institution name as well as their city of residence. Participants were assigned numbers during data analysis, and pseudonyms were used in this paper to discuss their experiences. Post-transcription, the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012), where the data were assigned codes and further reviewed for emerging themes. Afterwards, the initial codes were

grouped together as focused codes, and each focused codes were further categorized to fit

broader themes. As there were only four participants, four interviews were coded via thematic

analysis, therefore study findings may have not been accurately representative of the LGBTQ+

Muslim experience in postsecondary settings.

Validity and reliability were determined using theoretical triangulation by using the

identified theoretical frameworks to understand the findings, as well as analyst triangulation

(Denzin 1978, Patton 1999), as well as member checking (Leung 2015). Member checking was

completed by inviting interview participants to engage in the process with compensation

provided at the end of the consultation. Participant feedback during the member checking

process were conducted over Zoom. Furthermore, thick description was used to describe how

LGBTQ+ Muslim students' cultural identities, social relationships informed their mental health

experience in post-secondary institutions and accessing social services in those institutions

(Lincoln and Guba 1985, Holloway 1997). Thick description is a technique used in qualitative

research providing a detailed and comprehensive overview of participants' perspectives,

intentions, situations, motives, meanings, and understandings. In addition, thick description

called for researchers to offer a detailed narrative of their mental processes as they make sense of

the research findings (Younas et al 2023).

Critical reflexivity is defined as a reflexive approach that allows for examination of the

research process within political and socio-cultural contexts and allows the researcher to ask

ethical and political questions in relation to the research process, and to represent the

participants' voice accurately (Palaganas et. al 2017). Therefore, for this project, critical

reflexivity was incorporated during data collection and analysis processes using methods

outlined by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006) and Mauthner and Doucet (2003), which engaged

the researcher's social location, personal and academic backgrounds, interpersonal and

institutional contexts, etc. A reflexive journal was kept, to reflect on the researcher's identity not

only as a LGBTQ+ Muslim individual, but also as a social work student researcher. Reflexivity

was incorporated in context of the researcher's own intersecting identities of race, religion,

gender and sexual orientation, social location, and education in relation to the data collected from

participants.

### *Protection of Collected Data*

All information collected for the purpose of the study were stored on Microsoft

OneDrive, the access to which was obtained via subscriptions purchased by the Wilfrid Laurier

University. Each interview transcript were password protected, and each participant were given a

unique code and pseudonym when the transcripts are used for data analysis. Furthermore,

collected information were only accessed by the researcher, and the thesis committee chair, Dr.

Maryam Khan.

## Results

### *Demographic Survey*

All participants filled out a demographic survey prior to their interview. The survey was

developed using Qualtrics software (license obtained by Wilfrid Laurier University). Out of the

four participants, two participants identified as Queer, one as pansexual and one participant as

lesbian. Furthermore, considering gender identity, one participant identified as a cis-woman, two

participants as non-binary, and one participant as gender non-conforming. Participants were from

diverse ethnic backgrounds from cultural communities located in South Asia, Southeast Asia,

and the Middle East. Considering identities related to denomination in Islam, majority of

participants identified as being raised as Sunni, while one participant identified as Ismaili.

Participants were asked if their mental health experiences were impacted, positively or

negatively, due to using services within the university's student affairs or LGBTQ+ specific

departments or resource centres. For this question, majority of participants voted 'yes,' while one

participant voted 'no.' A table containing the results from the demographics can be found in

Appendix D.

**Thematic Analysis Findings**

From the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, four key themes have been

reported on in this paper. These themes were: 1) Lack of cultural competency, dominance of

western beliefs and standards 2) Experiences of exclusion due to lack of accessible, inclusive,

and safe spaces, and its impact on participant mental health, 3) Mental health impacts of making

meaning of identity through creating communities, advocacy, and peer support, 4) Impact of

COVID-19 on participants. All participant quotes were referred using pseudonyms. The four

participants were Ahmed, Fatima, Rahman and Aida, who attended post-secondary institutions in

Ontario at college, undergraduate and graduate levels. Although this research study only engaged

four participants, the data collected during the interviews provided rich and textured descriptions

of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals navigating the various barriers in their postsecondary

journeys. The outlined themes are described in detail in the following:

*Theme 1: Lack of cultural competency, dominance of western beliefs and standards*

All participants in this interview identified how cultural competency were lacking in

across all levels of the academic institution they attended, such as instructors, staff, and student

services. They recalled how instructors often failed to address topics related to LGBTQ+ and/or

Muslim identities and used gendered language. Ahmed discussed how instructors did not feel comfortable addressing discriminatory remarks, leaving it up to students to often debrief these experiences by themselves. The participants recalled how curriculum taught in the classroom reinforced western knowledge, exoticizing and diminishing the value of eastern and indigenous ways of knowing. Fatima noted:

> "*In terms of class content and stuff like that. I think this is just a general indictment of* [name of program], *which is that it's very much let's create a space for everyone and that usually just resorts to the dominant group being able to ask questions without people judging them for it. And which I think is a bit frustrating.*"

In the abovementioned quote, Fatima referred to a program in a helping profession. They noted how discussions around marginalized identities were usually at surface level, and ultimately the comfort of their white colleagues was emphasized. It is worth noting that Fatima described their experience as being 'a bit frustrating,' whereas the frustration and disappointment levels ran much deeper. During the member checking process, Rahman noted that occupying multiple marginalized identities shaped individuals to inherently adopt attributes that encouraged them to take up minimal space. They discussed how the process of assimilation and precarious immigration status influenced how one takes up space, as well as authentically express their disappointment or frustration with an authority figure. In the case of this study, although intentional spaces were created to allow for participants to speak freely of their experiences without judgment, their experiences may have been minimized unintentionally.

Additionally, the participants discussed how entities within their institutions (such as faculty, departments, and student-run organizations) engaged in 'performative allyship.' The

term 'ally' or 'allyship' is used to refer to individuals who express support for disadvantaged

groups and challenge the status quo, engaging in individual and collective efforts for social

change (Radke et al 2020, Louis et. al 2019). 'Performative allyship' is considered a form of

insincere allyship where allies may engage in actions driven by motives unrelated to benefiting

the disadvantaged groups, and their actions may either lack contribution or, in the long term,

prove detrimental to these groups (Nadler and Halabi 2006, Becker et. al 2018). Participants

noted that their institutions practiced performative allyship by creating so-called 'inclusive

spaces' that were built on the labour of student organizers and advocates and took credit for

themselves. Furthermore, the institutions showed interests in initiatives that would give them a

boost in credibility as a diverse organization and expected students to take on labour that is

required to build inclusive, accessible, and affirming spaces. This extended to many student run

organizations on campus, where they put out statements on historically important dates, but

seldom put in the effort to build inclusive spaces for students to find community on campus.

Ahmed noted:

> "*So, it's called* [names institution's social inclusion student club], *and it says an inclusion*
>
> *space at* [name of institution of attendance] *open to all students. That's pretty much it.*
>
> *And then they posted yesterday about the transgender day of Remembrance, but then the*
>
> *last time they posted was back in October. And this whole semester there haven't been*
>
> *any events from them whatsoever, that's just nothing. It's really nice that they post things*
>
> *about the transgender day of Remembrance, but what are you actually doing for your*
>
> *students right now on campus as a club that is focused on intersectionality, right?*
>
> *Nothing.*"

In the aforementioned statement, it can be seen that the organization engaged in an act of performative allyship, did the bare minimum and not cater to student needs. Ahmed noted that they were encouraged to start their own club after speaking with their institution's student union about the lack of LGBTQ+ positive spaces on campus. They recalled how the onus was placed on the students to make these spaces for themselves, and during the member checking process, they revealed that they ended up creating an initiative for racialized LGBTQ+ students on campus. Ahmed noted how discussing their experience in this study helped them realize the need for inclusive spaces on campus, and that they had the power to start an initiative that would cater to marginalized students and help them find a sense of belonging on campus.

Speaking further on the normalization of western beliefs as the standard, the participants identified ableism, limited cultural competency among staff and faculty, as well as adherence to cis-heteropatriarchal standards. Rahman noted that academic institutions were originally created to uphold and maintain social class stratification, and there would always be a sense of distrust among students, in the institutions' ability to create truly inclusive and accessible spaces on campus. Rahman said:

> "*Honestly, I think I've stopped looking to my university to provide sources of community. I think that's something that would be against the university's interest if we think about the university, its original purpose was to teach a way of thinking that would not be threatening to or would support the status quo where we have the hetero patriarchal Christian hegemony.*"

Most participants resonated with the abovementioned statement during the member-checking process, discussing that they did not have full trust in their institution and its ability to

adequately support its student population. Participants discussed that changes at smaller scale would provide some benefits to students, however a systemic overhaul was needed to create intersectional spaces of belonging for students.

***Theme 2: Experiences of exclusion due to lack of accessible, inclusive, and safe spaces, and its impact on participant mental health***

In continuation with the first theme, the participants discussed in detail how they experienced exclusion at various levels within their institution of attendance, and how it impacted their sense of belonging and overall well-being. Participants talked about how they had either reconciled with this seemingly contradictory identity or were in the process of doing so. Participants mentioned that they rarely reached out services catered for Muslim students, as they feared backlash regarding their LGBTQ+ identity. Participants who were open about their LGBTQ+ identity discussed if they would have authentically expressed themselves, (e.g., perceived as Queer or Trans due to stereotypes associated with the LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse communities) it would have resulted in discomfort, or outright expulsion from Muslim dominant spaces. Rahman noted how their childhood experience of being excluded from a mosque had resulted in their reluctance to reach out for faith-related support on campus. They discussed how their gender identity created barriers as many of these spaces were segregated based on the gender binary, therefore they did not know where to sit as they had identified as a trans individual. Most participants talked about the perception of the LGBTQ+ community in many Muslim dominant spaces, which were negative in nature, and previous experiences had led them to not disclose their identity. Furthermore, they believed that they would not receive adequate support navigating their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and faith, and this lack of trust ultimately discouraged them from accessing these resources on campus. Some participants noted

that their institution did not have any prayer spaces or faith-based groups to begin with. They

talked about the lack of initiatives or space created to discuss these topics in these faith-based

forums, as a result, they did not feel comfortable asking for support.

Participants spoke about how religious scriptures were misinterpreted, and the invasion of

colonial beliefs led to the exclusion of Queer and Trans Muslims in many Muslim-dominant

spaces, based on participants' lived experiences. The colonial beliefs the participants referred to

the establishment of the gender binary, whereas Islamic historical discourse contains descriptions

about intersex and third gender identities (Gesink 2018). Additionally, construction and

implementation of the gender binary were one of many colonial acts used to erase diverse gender

identities in various cultural communities, the impacts of which had now seeped into many

religious discourses that previously acknowledged gender diversity (O'Sullivan 2021, Migrant

Rights Network, 2023).

Participants noted how they chose not to talk about their Muslim identity outside of

Muslim dominant spaces, as they felt responsible for the 'reputation' of their community.

Participants did not want to further feed into the harmful stereotypes and Islamophobia that are

harbored by many individuals outside of the Muslim community. The participants noted that

discussing their faith was not an option in these spaces, including many LGBTQ+ positive

spaces on campus, as they tended to be secular in nature. This is because many individuals in

these spaces may have had a contentious relationship with their faith, given current belief

systems in many organizational religions are rooted in homophobia. Furthermore, participants

discussed discriminatory attitudes toward the Muslim community, and how they were treated as

a monolith and Islamophobic remarks were made. The participants indicated that white

supremacy still persisted in LGBTQ+ positive spaces. They discussed the expectation to adhere

to beliefs and standards related to North American LGBTQ+ culture. This meant that there were limited spaces for participants to feel authentically themselves and allow for these two identities to co-exist. Rahman, described the dissonance they experienced in navigating Muslim specific resources and LGBTQ+ resources on their campus:

"*This is me generalizing, but I feel like these Muslim spaces [on campus] are less queer friendly and perhaps more conservative. But I also don't have that experience per se. It comes from fear and it not having been disproved, but I don't think that it's entirely fair of myself to make that assumption. And then conversely, in queer spaces queer spaces on campuses have been so white, so agnostic or atheist favoring, and I just choose not to engage for the most part.*"

In the aforementioned quote, Rahman noted how their previous experience in Muslim-oriented service spaces had created hesitancy in reaching out for support on campus, and conversely created a sense of apprehension in accessing LGBTQ+ resources, due to limited representation of diversity within LGBTQ+ dedicated spaces on campus.

On discussing availability of resources, participants talked about the limited resources that were accessible to them. Many of these resources were either not well-advertised or simply available. One participant discussed how attending a different campus (located away from the main campus of their institution) further excluded them from accessing support. Participants noted that the lack of inclusive and accessible spaces made them feel isolated. They ultimately took it upon themselves to start their own community on campus or seek out support outside of it. Participants noted that they were able to find affirming and supportive care outside of campus, from referrals from own their communities of support or searching for counselling services themselves. Participants noted that they did not access any resources via the Queer Muslim

Network, rather it was a space where they could connect with other LGBTQ+ Muslims and socialize with one another.

On discussing the availability of mental health support on campus, participants recalled long waitlists at their institution's counselling services, and how students were prioritized based on level of risk. Participants mentioned that the process of finding mental health support at their institutions were incredibly stressful. They also discussed barriers present in getting registered with their school's accessibility services, often having to provide multiple forms of authentication, paperwork and still being denied accommodation by their instructors. Furthermore, they discussed how major Christian holidays led to holiday breaks, and Islamic holidays such as Eid or observing Ramadan required special permission from instructors. Participants identified the general lack of infrastructure required to support Muslim students, such as access to prayer spaces, deadline extensions, and exam accommodations. The participants noted how they did not have much hope for the services available at their institution and they tried to make best use of the limited resources available.

Participants discussed limited availability of intersectional spaces, as well as presence of transphobia in many LGBTQ+ affirming spaces on campus. Ahmed recalled how their campus did not have dedicated spaces for LGBTQ+ identifying students, which made it challenging for them to find much needed support:

> "*Honestly, I don't feel much of a sense of belongingness at all on my campus. There are, forget queer Muslim people. There aren't that many queer people to start with because my campus at [post-secondary institution in Ontario] doesn't really have much of a platform or a space for us to collectively exist then or get to know each other.*"

The participants noted that some institutions did not even have spaces catered for LGBTQ+ students on campus. It was an interesting observation on the author's part that participants from major cities attended institutions that had these inclusive spaces, however participants outside of these cities, and attending smaller institutions, did not have the privilege of accessing specialized services and student resources.

Although many participants were hopeful when they initially sought support, these hopes were quickly shattered. Participants noted that due to feeling excluded and isolated, they sought out support systems outside of campus, or engaged in student initiatives that were meaningful for them. They also sought out mental health professionals outside of their institutions or relied on their existing communities of support to address these mental health impacts. Participants discussed how disclosing their identities in either of these spaces meant higher chance of either being excluded or fetishized. They noted feelings of frustration in having to navigate multiple barriers to access support in their academic journey. They discussed hiding parts of their identity and 'code switching' to avoid raising suspicion. Participants also talked about accessibility of services, presence of campus police, and being aware of their student status. Participants did not trust their institutions out of fear of being ostracized, penalized for creating resistance or dealing with poor mental health. Aida noted:

> "*Usually, it's because I feel alone in my experiences in a way. And most of the time it's just being in my head about being both Queer and Muslim. How do I say it? I would go to a support but then I wouldn't really fully feel comfortable identifying, telling people that I identify as both. So, I would just try to get and make use of the resources I have access to; even though it's not, it could have fit better anyway.*"

Considering feedback, participants discussed that their institutions should take student-centered approach, provide culturally competent training, and play an active role in creating accessibility and inclusivity for marginalized identities on campus, instead of engaging in performative allyship. One participant commented that ultimately academic institutions could not be trusted to build these spaces, as the institutions' own mission and goals takes priority. Other participants noted that these institutions had a long way to go.

### Theme 3: Mental health impacts of making meaning of identity through creating communities, advocacy, and peer support

On experiencing exclusion on various levels on campus, participants resorted to taking up the initiative to build their own support networks. This included relying on their peers for help, connecting with professors they had a positive relationship with, and joining advocacy groups both on and off campus. Participant mentioned having access to community helped them experience positive mental health and foster their sense of belonging. Some participants reflected that these experiences allowed them to be aware of their own social location, and embody inclusive, accessible, and culturally competent values in their own professions they were pursuing. They critically reflected on the role of these institutions in upholding barriers and cis-heteropatriarchal standards. On finding community on campus, Fatima discussed the importance of receive support from peers with similar intersectional experiences:

> "*They have my shared identity, they understand what I'm talking about, they understand the nuances and all that kind stuff. When we're able to have these really heartwarming discussions about how to find the balance that we're all looking for in terms of acculturation and then being diaspora and all that kind of stuff, we're able to have these*

*wonderful conversations that's so lovely to be with people who just get it and to be with*

*those people who I'm in school with also. Great. These are people who are also becoming*

[professionals in front line services] *who are also being very mindful and aware about*

*the very white centric way that* [type of frontline work] *is usually practiced."*

Considering safety and accessibility of spaces on campus, participants discussed how

they were not 'truly' safe, accessible, or inclusive, however some spaces were 'safer' compared

to others. They examined the role of past, present, and future student organizers, and their fight

to create inclusive and accessible spaces on campus. They noted that these safer spaces existed

because of the unpaid labour of student advocates. Rahman stated how students' trauma were

exploited, as many organizers experienced poor mental health themselves:

*"So, I think, well, I know that these services are likely the result of task forces or*

*responses to community outrage and community advocacy. And I can say this as someone who's*

*been on many task forces and often those task forces don't actually include queer students. And*

*at [institution of attendance], I was part of one initially there were out of ten people, there were*

*two queer students including me, and I was the only person of color at all. And then even if you*

*do have a good working group, they're not paid enough or paid at all, which is the case for me*"

Rahman further discussed how these student advocates expended labour with limited to

no financial compensation. Furthermore, several institutional policies related to equity, diversity

and inclusion were created based on the foundational work done by student advocates, but they

were rarely acknowledged or compensated for their valuable contributions.

Participants discussed that despite the overall presence of barriers, initiatives from

students and student life professionals resulted in creation of faith-based events for LGBTQ+ and

spiritual students. It is important to mention that not all participants had access to such events. Some participants reported that they did not experience blatant discrimination on campus, however they did experience more subtle forms of discrimination such as microaggressions related to their Muslim identity and/or LGBTQ+ and gender diverse identities. They also discussed the presence of barriers, such as long wait times for receiving counselling support, which deterred them from seeking supports offered by their institution. As a result, encountering barriers on campus informed their decision to seek support from peers and outside of campus. Aida reflects on their experience trying to access mental health support in the following:

> "*At that time in my university to get counseling would take a few months because we would all be on the waiting list first and I would either find a counselor by myself or wait for four months even though I would have needed it sooner. And the process of finding my own therapist was just too much, much. I sort of neglected it and I got better on my own just from spending more time with friends and people. But what didn't help? I'm not sure what didn't help. I'm pretty sure there's a lot of things that didn't help me, but I just like don't mind them.*"

For this statement, during member checking process, another participant identified how this Aida's school failed to support them at multiple levels and discussed how marginalized students fell through the cracks. Furthermore, presence of such barriers ultimately negatively impacted students' mental health, and overall influenced their engagement levels in their post-secondary journey. A culmination of these experiences contributed to their distrust in the institution's ability to fully support its students.

***Theme 4: Impact of COVID-19 on participants***

Participants were asked if the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ability to access community on campus, as post-secondary institutions shifted over to online delivery in the duration of the pandemic. Participants reported mixed experiences in navigating community spaces during the pandemic. They reported that overall, their mental health was negatively impacted due to lack of organic conversations that took place during in-person interactions, as well as experiencing Zoom fatigue due to constantly accessing classes and other social events online. Furthermore, participants noted that they could only access information about community-related events via social media. They reported concerns over data security breach due to the public nature of many online events that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also identified accessibility issues that arose due to the overwhelming use of Zoom for all online events, such as lack of live transcription services during early stages of the pandemic, and other technological accessibility services. Although participants appreciated the emergence of many online community groups which hosted various social events for people across the globe, there were not enough opportunities to receive supportive care. Aida recalled how they lost their access to community during the pandemic, and online events were not as engaging as in-person interactions:

*"Oh yes, it does affect it the way my access to community on campus…….I think it really does impact it cause it's really hard to during the time it was really hard to create in-person events and even though there would be online events, it's not as engaging or yeah it was not as fun or can really connect….directly connect with people."*

On the other hand, some participants reported that they benefitted from the shift to online platforms, as it provided them the opportunity to connect with people across the globe. Participants recalled how the Black Lives Matter movement, and the impact of their advocacy during the 2020, shed light on racial injustice and systemic oppression, and inspired other marginalized communities to take action and leadership on creating solidarity in their own pockets of community. Participants recalled how they felt isolated as LGBTQ+ Muslims prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. During and post-pandemic, they were made aware of the existence of LGBTQ+ Muslim communities across the world, and able to connect with them due to online events. Ahmed described the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'silver lining' that connected LGBTQ+ Muslims across nations:

*"Weirdly enough, I think it might have made it easier for queer Muslim people to connect with one another through over the pandemic because I feel like it increased people reaching out to one another, getting to know each other over social media starting more. I started noticing more and more platforms for queer Muslim people on social media than I had ever before Covid. Right before, I feel like it was generally just for queer people, maybe queer people of color. That was the maximum that I had ever seen. But throughout the pandemic I started noticing more and more about for queer Muslim people popping up. So, I feel like COVID-19, a silver lining might have actually been that I was able to connect with more of them."*

During the member-checking process, the other participants agreed with Ahmed's observation that there were much more LGBTQ+ Muslim visibility during and post-pandemic years compared to pre-pandemic years. The participants noted that it may have been due to the lack of representation that prompted organizers to create communal spaces dedicated to LGBTQ+ Muslims.

Additionally, it is important to note that all interviews for this research study were conducted over Zoom due to considerations related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as participants were scattered throughout the province of Ontario. Conducting interviews online provided participants accessibility to choose flexible interview times, as well as the option to change their names during the recorded Zoom call. However, it was difficult to gauge participants' emotional reactions while discussing their mental health experiences, although they were asked check-in questions at the end of the interview, to assess for any emotional discomfort that may have come up due to the nature of certain interview questions. Participants were also asked about their interview experience during the member-checking process, and they all reported positive experiences.

**Discussion**

The study findings suggested that LGBTQ+ Muslim students in post-secondary institutions experienced exclusion in relation to their intersectional identity of being Muslim and identifying under the 2SLGBTQ+ umbrella, which negatively impacted their mental health. This experience of exclusion came in the form of a lack of cultural competency from faculty, staff and peers, an emphasis on dominant belief systems, and limited availability of inclusive spaces and accessibility related services. As a result, the participants did not find necessary supports at their respective institutions, believing that the available infrastructures were not equipped to address the issues they encountered, and the help they needed. Instead, participants took it upon themselves to find peer support and mental health resources outside of the campus. Aligned with existing literature, all participants discussed the contradictory nature of their identity as a LGBTQ+ Muslim, as dominant Muslim views and beliefs portray diverse sexual orientation as 'sinful.' LGBTQ+ Muslims often have to carve out their own path and reconcile with their faith

in their own terms (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Siraj 2016). The experiences captured in this

study can be precisely represented in light of the frameworks incorporated, which are:

intersectionality framework and minority stress model. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality

framework accurately describes the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims in Ontario's post-

secondary institutions at the intersection of race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Furthermore, as a result of these intersections, participants experienced further stressors related

to their mental health, experienced poor outcomes, and described accordingly using the minority

stress model (Meyer 2003). Ultimately, each participant ultimately carved their own

understanding of what it meant to be Muslim and LGBTQ+, which is shaped by their

experiences and communities of support. In addition, their identity as 'LGBTQ+ Muslim' is ever

shifting throughout their lives.

The findings of this study were consistent with existing literature regarding the exclusion

LGBTQ+ Muslims experience both in their cultural communities as well as 2SLGBTQ+ positive

spaces. Alvi and Zaidi (2021) noted in their study how LGBTQ+ Muslims living in Canada

experienced homophobia in their cultural communities and racial microaggressions outside of

these communities. Specifically, Muslim individuals are often subjected to overt and covert

forms of discrimination, due to stereotypes created by western media post 9/11 (Reitz et. al

2009), which impacted Muslim immigrants in many countries across the Global North.

Furthermore, participants' experience of exclusion on campus and its impact on their mental

health can also be echoed in existing literature (Mathies et al. 2019; Woodford et al. 2018).

LGBTQ+ students who experienced heterosexism and discrimination based on their sexual

orientation have reported to experience worsened anxiety and depression-related symptoms

compared to their heterosexual peers (Woodford and Kulick 2014). However, current literature

also revealed that supportive academic environments, presence of LGBTQ+ affirming groups could positively influence the students' experiences and were positively correlated to their academic success (Kosciw et. al 2012; Garvey et. al 2018; Ioverno et. al 2016). This was reflected in the participants' experiences, where they sought out their own support systems by connecting with peers with similar identities and joining advocacy groups both on and off campus. This resulted in positive impact on their mental health and helped them deal with the repercussions of experiencing exclusion on campus in a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment. Lastly, the COVID-19 experiences of the participants were consistent with existing literature, which reported higher levels of mental distress and loneliness among postsecondary students (Stamatis et al 2020; Maleku et al 2022).

The findings of this study can be applied to social work practice at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social work practitioners working one on one with LGBTQ+ Muslims can build on their cultural competency as well as develop their understanding on how LGBTQ+ Muslims, specifically those attending postsecondary institutions, navigate their intersectional identities and how experiences of exclusion can negatively impact their mental health. Social work practitioners can identify sources of community support for their LGBTQ+ Muslim clients and create spaces where they feel affirmed in their multi-faceted identities. At the mezzo level, support for LGBTQ+ Muslims can include hosting community events catered specifically for them, creating peer support groups, providing training to social work professionals working in postsecondary settings, and community-based organizations. Engaging in collaborative approaches with organizations working closely with LGBTQ+ Muslims can benefit both service users as well as social workers committed to anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice. For the macro social work level, these findings can be implemented in creating policies where LGBTQ+

Muslim students are protected in postsecondary settings as well as heteronormative spaces. Social workers working with Muslim communities can provide a much-needed safe space for LGBTQ+ Muslims who may not be out of the closet or do not feel comfortable disclosing their identities. Furthermore, the findings of this research study are not only applicable to LGBTQ+ Muslims but also for spiritually or religiously affiliated LGBTQ+ communities. Creating platforms for interfaith and intercultural exchange for LGBTQ+ individuals help build solidarity and opportunities for mutual caregiving and support. Overall, the findings highlighted the much-needed training and resources required for marginalized individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, creating opportunities where they feel represented and supported.

**Limitations**

Considering the methodological limitations of the study, it has been previously discussed that LGBTQ+ Muslims can be hard to reach out to (Rayside, 2011). Potential participants may not have felt comfortable partaking in the survey unless the intentions and identity of the researcher were clearly explained. Moreover, research study participants for hard-to-reach populations were often recruited through snowballing techniques, which has been applied in this research study. However, it may have been difficult to recruit participants unless there was an already established relationship with the identified student groups or offices that would have helped with participant recruitment. Since the primary researcher of this study already had an established connection to the Queer Muslim Network of Toronto, it was possible to connect with LGBTQ+ Muslims as the organization themselves vetted the legitimacy of the project.

Furthermore, all participants in the study attended postsecondary institutions in Southern Ontario and identified within South and Southeast Asian ethnicities. Therefore, the findings may not have been representative of LGBTQ+ Muslim students' experiences across the entirety of the

province and the rest of Canada. Additionally, completing the interview brought up some unpleasant experiences for participants, and the lack of mental health support could have caused further harm. Due to the nature of the study, participants were unable to debrief their experiences with the researcher, except for the member checking meetings. Therefore, lists of resources for mental health support were provided to the participants prior to their interviews. The resources were listed in the consent form, which participants completed before starting the survey. Participants were fully compensated regardless of completion of the survey or interview. Considering the generalizability of the research project, the study focused on a specific community's issues. Therefore, its findings could not be completely applicable to the larger population. However, the need for building culturally competent care for diverse communities is still applicable in many racialized and marginalized communities. As a result, the study findings had the potential to inform post-secondary social services and social workers on how to effectively support their diverse student population.

Lastly, the application of the theoretical frameworks in analyzing the study results does not come without its own drawbacks. The first theoretical framework, the Minority Stress Model (MSM), acknowledges that multiple minority identities are categorical rather than intersectional in nature (Meyer 2003). Minority stress can be experienced in both LGBTQ+ communities as well as outside of it. This theory does not take into account how childhood trauma, historical trauma and age can influence a LGBTQ+ identifying individual's ability to navigate experiences of victimization, exclusion, and fear of rejection (Hoy-Ellis 2023). However, the issue of intersectional interactions of multi-faceted identities have been addressed using Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework. For the purpose of this research study, religious identity and sexual orientation and gender identity have been specifically highlighted. Although, all

participants of this study came with multi-faceted identities, their race, ethnicity, education, social location, familial upbringing, and access to community support influenced the way they navigated their postsecondary journeys. For example, many of these identity aspects, such as access to education, finances, and community support would have acted as privileges for participants and positively influenced their mental well-being while pursuing their post-secondary education. Yet, these identity facets have only been briefly discussed in the interviews and they have not been thoroughly examined during thematic analysis.

**Knowledge Mobilization, Future Directions and Concluding Remarks**

The emerging themes from this study helped inform what service gaps exist for LGBTQ+ Muslim students. How the students' access support outside of their institutions' student life services were also taken into consideration. The findings of this research study help with understanding how to accommodate and create safe, accessible spaces for LGBTQ+ students who may not fit the cis and white dominant standards set in LGBTQ+ communities. Furthermore, it enables student life professionals and social workers on campus to identify the type of competency training required to effectively support culturally diverse LGBTQ+ students on campus. The academic institutions can collaborate with community-based organizations who can provide necessary supports for specific marginalized student groups on campus. These kinds of collaborative partnerships help the institutions remain accountable to their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as provide inclusive spaces where students can feel connected to.

From a social work perspective, the findings of the study can help social service programs inside and outside of post-secondary institutions understand how to effectively support LGBTQ+ Muslim individuals, providing a safe, accessible space for them to access help for their

needs and build community. For social workers who provide counselling support, these findings can inform them of the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslims and provide culturally relevant knowledge, which can help them support their LGBTQ+ Muslim clients better. This addresses how study findings can be implemented at micro levels. Additionally, the recommendation for university/college and community partnerships provides opportunity for positive change at the mezzo level. Lastly, implementing study findings in institutional and organizational policies, as well as provincial and federal policies related to sexual and gender diversity, creates the potential for positive impact at the macro level.

The goal of this research project was to ultimately bring awareness to the organizational experiences of LGBTQ+ Muslim students and create additional supports for individuals who seemingly fall through the cracks. Participants of the study had the opportunity to engage in the member-checking process, to ensure that the findings of the study represented the needs of the community. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the overall research purpose underwent comprehensive reflection to understand whether the chosen data collection methods properly captured the needs and issues of the identified community members. Furthermore, a report will be created for distribution amongst participants, faculty, and staff members, who are interested in the results of the project. The intended audience for this project are LGBTQ+ Muslim individuals, student life professionals in public universities and colleges across Ontario, as well as social work researchers in higher education and working with LGBTQ+ Muslims outside of postsecondary settings.

As a queer researcher, conducting this research project was positively affirming in my LGBTQ+ Muslim identity. Having the opportunity to connect with fellow LGBTQ+ Muslims one-on-one and learn about their postsecondary experiences in such a vulnerable and authentic

manner helped me understand the importance of recording and preserving LGBTQ+ Muslim voices and their stories, as well as aid in developing culturally competent services and policies.

Extant social work research offers limited information on how LGBTQ+ Muslim students navigate their mental health as they pursue higher education. There is extensive research available on post-secondary LGBTQ+ student experience and LGBTQ+ Muslims' experience in navigating their intersecting identities. However, from an organizational perspective, not much is known about how institutions play a role in supporting LGBTQ+ Muslims in work or academic spaces. This study bridged this gap and offered opportunities for higher education institutions to create culturally competent services for these individuals, thus ensuring student success and well-being. Furthermore, shedding light on the LGBTQ+ Muslim student experience could bring further awareness and inform both cultural communities on and off-campus to ensure the creation of safe, accessible spaces for diverse LGBTQ+ individuals. It provides post-secondary institutions the opportunity to generate new relationships with community organizations that support these demographics and help create innovative community-university partnerships that seek to create accessible, equitable spaces for racially, culturally, and spiritually diverse LGBTQ+ individuals both on and off-campus.

**Appendix A**
**Consent Form:**

**Informed Consent Statement**

**Title**: Examining the Mental Health Experiences of LGBTQ+ Identifying Muslim Students in Ontario Post-Secondary Institutions

Lead Researcher: Bushra Ahmed, Master of Social Work Candidate, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University

**Thesis Committee:** Dr. Maryam Khan (Chair), and Dr. Ginette Lafrenière (Member), Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University

The research study aims to examine closely the mental health experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim students in post-secondary institutions across Ontario. The aim of this study is to identify gaps within student services in these institutions and develop recommendations to offer a safe and accessible learning experience for LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim students, which in turn, would offer culturally competent training for student life professionals to provide culturally relevant support to its diverse student communities within the larger LGBTQ+ student population. The project is led by Bushra Ahmed, a self-identifying queer and non-binary Muslim student. The research will be funded through the Thesis/Dissertation Research Fund provided by the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University.

**Study Information:** The study will consist of complete voluntary participation. It is a two-part study, which consists of an online demographic survey to be completed by participants, followed by a one-on-one interview conducted by the Principal Investigator.

    a. **Participants:** You will be asked to attend an interview, scheduled over Zoom, which will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete. As a student participant, you will be asked about your overall post-secondary experience, considering your sexual and gender identity, religious affiliation, and mental health. You will also be provided the opportunity to answer open-ended questions related to these factors and provide feedback on how your post-secondary institution can support you better. The eligibility criteria for the study are provided in the following:
    -    Must attend a public post-secondary institution in Ontario, or recently graduated in the last 3 years (2019 or later)
    -    Must identify with or questioning; LGBTQIA+ identities. These identities include but not limited to: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Asexual, Intersex, Trans (including but not limited to transgender, non-binary, agender, bigender, trans feminine, trans masculine, gender-queer, gender-fluid) identities.
    -    Must identify as Muslim (recognizing that Muslim identities are multidimensional, can identify religiously, culturally, spiritually etc., does not need to practice Islam)

- Can be either permanent resident, citizen or resided in Ontario in the duration of their study
- Had their mental health impacted (positive or negative experiences) due to access to services within the university's student affairs or LGBTQ+ specific departments/resource centres

**Interview Process:** All interviews will take place over Zoom for Health platform and will be scheduled based on your availability. Prior to starting the interview, you will be provided some time to review and sign the consent form and complete an online demographic survey. This demographic survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete, and will ask questions about your identities, your program of study, and briefly about your experiences on campus. Afterwards, the interview will be conducted by the principal investigator. The interview will be audio recorded with your consent, using the lead researcher's mobile device. During the recording process, video will be turned off to protect your identity. You also have the option to change your name on Zoom, prior to starting the recording. Once the audio file is recorded, it will be transcribed manually by the lead researcher, and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process. You can opt-out of the audio recording of the interview, in which case the principal investigator will take notes throughout the interview.

All identifying information collected will be kept confidential. Participants have the right to not answer specific questions in the interview and can withdraw from the interview at any point. Full compensation will be provided to the participants irrespective of the completion status of the interview. However, participants will not be compensated if they partake in the demographic survey, but not the interview

**Potential Risks:** Some components of the interview questions may ask you to draw upon your not-so-positive experiences in navigating student services and mental health as an LGBTQ+ (identifying or questioning) post-secondary Muslim student. As a result, this may bring up feelings of discomfort, frustration, or sadness. If your participation in the study causes continued experience of negative emotions, please contact the lead researcher Bushra Ahmed, or a mental health resource that is local to you. A list of resources has also been provided in this consent form, under the "Resource" section. You have the right withdraw from the study at any point you wish to do so and will be fully compensated. There are no repercussions for rate of completion for the survey or interview.

**Benefits**: Currently, there is limited research available on Muslim LGBTQ+ student experience. You will help bridge the gap in the mental health experience of LGBTQ+ Muslims within an organizational context, across the province of Ontario. Your participation will help identify the unique issues faced by LGBTQ+ Muslim students, in navigating their intersecting identities within a post-secondary context. Results of this study will help inform student affairs professionals to develop culturally competent training, and also provide recommendations to improve existing services, to accommodate the diverse experiences and needs within the LGBTQ+ student community.

**Confidentiality**: All identifying information collected through this study, such as your name, student number or email address will not be used in the publication or presentation of study results. Only the lead researcher, Bushra Ahmed, and their supervisor, Dr. Maryam Khan will have access to this information. For the interview, the meeting link will be protected with a passcode and waiting room will be created to ensure your privacy. **We ask that you complete the interview from a private location.** During the interview recording process, video will be turned off to protect your identity. You also have the option to change your name on Zoom, prior to starting the recording. For the interview recordings, the transcription company will be accessing the collected audio files to transcribe the interview. All identifying info will be coded and pseudonyms will be assigned to the quotations used in the findings. Any identifying information in quotations will be redacted in the final write-ups or presentations. All data related to the study will be on Microsoft OneDrive (License purchased by Wilfrid Laurier University), and in password protected files. Data from the project will be destroyed by December 31st, 2027.

**Compensation**: All participants will receive $25 compensation in either an Amazon or President's Choice gift card, which will be provided by email. You will still be fully compensated if you choose to withdraw from the study. You will also receive additional $10 compensation if you choose to partake in the member checking process (Please see next section for more information on the member checking process)

**Member Checking:**  Typically, member checking process is a part of the research process that consists of the researcher presenting a summary of results to the participants, to ensure the participants' experience has been captured correctly. For this project, member checking will occur via Zoom. **This meeting will not be recorded**. The meeting will be 30-60 minutes long. I will email you a password-protected document containing the summary of results, as well as quotes to be used from the main interview, prior to the member checking meeting. Participation in the member checking process is entirely optional.


If you have consented to have your de-identified quotes used in the final write-up but do not partake in the member-checking process, you will still get the opportunity to vet your quotations either via email (I will send you a password protected documents containing the quotations, where you can comment your feedback) or set up a Zoom meeting where we can discuss your feedback.


**Contact**: If you have any questions about the study, please contact the lead researcher, Bushra Ahmed by email at ahme0424@mylaurier.ca. You can also reach out my thesis supervisor, Dr. Maryam Khan, by email at mkhan@wlu.ca.

 This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB#8306), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair,

University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca.

**Participation**: Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may decline to take part, without penalties. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any point during the interview. You have the right to not answer any questions you choose.

Quotations from your interview may be used in the study. You can still choose to participate in the study and decline requests to use any quotations from the interviews.

**Resources**:

·       National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255

·       Canada's Trans Lifeline at 877-330-6366

·       Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566 or text 45645

·       LGBT Youthline at 1-800-268-9688 or Text 647-694-4275 or Live Chat at youthline.ca (for youth aged 14-29)

·       Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868


**Publication**:

The data collection and analysis for this project will be complete by 2023. The results will be presented in a written report and conference presentations. The results may be submitted to relevant scholarly publications and presented at conferences and workshops. Participants can also choose to provide their email address to receive a summary of the results.

I agree to participate in the study.

□ Yes          □ No

I agree to be audio-recorded. **Note: If you do not consent to audio recording, then notes will be taken to capture your experience. All notes will be secure in password protected documents.**

□ Yes          □ No

I agree to have my de-identified quotes used in publications, conference workshops and presentations.

□ Yes          □ No


**Participant Name and Signature:**

**Principal Investigator Name and Signature:**

A blank copy of this consent statement will be provided to you for your records.

**Appendix B**
**Interview Guide for Participants**

- ➢ Provide brief description of the study
- ➢ Ask if they have any questions about the consent form
- ➢ Confidentiality and Protection of Data
- ➢ Compensation Procedure
- ➢ Consent to Record

**Demographic Questionnaire:**

1. Program and Year of Attendance
2. Sexual Identity and Gender Identity
3. Ethnicity
4. Identity within Muslim community (e.g., Shia, Ismaili, Sunni, Sufism)

**Questions about Mental Health:**

1. Can you describe your experience as an LGBTQ+ and/or gender-diverse Muslim student on campus?
2. Thinking of your sense of belongingness, could you describe your experience? What are your sources of community on campus?
3. Do you think your mental health was impacted on campus due to your identity as a Muslim and/or LGBTQ+ person (Y/N)?
   - o If you answered yes, please provide a brief description on how your mental health was affected (open ended)
4. Did you feel comfortable or safe enough to reach out for mental health support? (This could be either with your faculty, peers, or student services staff on campus).
   - o Please provide brief description on what helped and what didn't help


**Questions related to diverse settings within post-secondary education (academic, LGBTQ+ affirming, Muslim specific, student services):**

1. Did you feel that your university/college was able to foster LGBTQ+ positive space in the following settings: academic, student services, student life (student club, orientation, and athletic events)?

2. Are there dedicated LGBTQ+ services available in your university (Y/N)? Have you accessed these services in the duration of your program (Y/N)?

   - o If you answered yes, please answer the following questions:
     - a. Why did you reach out to these services?
     - b. Were they able to help with your problem? (Y/N)
     - c. What did you think worked or didn't work? (open-ended question)

3. Do you think the LGBTQ+ services at your institution were intersectional? *Note: intersectionality is defined as your identities such as race, ethnicity, religion etc. shape your life experiences and how you interact with the world (Crenshaw, 1989)*
- What worked? What didn't work? (open-ended question)
4. Were there offices, chaplaincies or student organizations dedicated to supporting Muslim students on campus? (Y/N)
   o Thinking of your identity as a cultural or religious Muslim, did you find support in spaces dedicated to Muslim students (i.e., Muslim Student Groups) (Y/N)
   o Did these services provide help regarding your sexual identity?
5. Did you ever feel that you had to hide your cultural identity to fit into LGBTQ+ spaces? Or the opposite, hide your LGBTQ+ or gender-diverse identity to fit into Muslim-specific spaces? (Y/N)
   o If you answered yes, please briefly explain how you had to conform to these standards (open-ended question)
6. Thinking of your identity as a Muslim LGBTQ+ person, did you ever feel discriminated by staff or students while on campus?
7. Do you have any suggestions for your school's student services team on what they can do better? Please provide any feedback you have.

**Questions about impact of COVID-19 on participants**

1. Do you feel that COVID-19 has impacted your access to community on campus?
   o If you answered yes, how did you navigate this loss?
2. Did COVID-19 impact your ability to connect with other LGBTQ+ Muslims or 2SLGBTQ+ groups?
3. Due to COVID19, many community and support groups created online events to support individuals. Did you attend any specific online events catered to LGBTQ+ Muslims?
   o If you answered yes, why did you reach out and what was the experience like?
   o If you answered no, were there specific barriers that prevented you from accessing these groups?

**Questions related to interview experiences**

1. Do you have any suggestions on your experience taking this interview? Please outline your feedback in the following.
2. Are there additional questions you would like us to ask on this interview?
3. Do you consent to member checking after the data is analyzed?

**Appendix C**
**Email Template:**

Hello and Salaam,


Thank you for your interest in my study. This study aims to interview gender-diverse and LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim post-secondary students and ask about their experiences navigating post-secondary education and how it impacts their well-being.


**About the researcher:**

I am a self-identifying non-binary and queer Muslim student, currently completing their Master of Social Work program at Wilfrid Laurier University. This study is part of my Masters' Thesis and I hope to learn more about the experiences of gender-diverse and LGBTQ+ identifying Muslim students in Ontario's public universities and colleges.


**Eligibility Criteria**

To be eligible for the study, you must meet the following criteria:


-       Attend a public post-secondary institution in Ontario, or recently graduated in the last 3 years (in 2019 or later).

- Identify with or questioning; LGBTQIA+ identities. These identities include but not limited to: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Asexual, Intersex, Trans (including but not limited to transgender, non-binary, agender, bigender, trans feminine, trans masculine, gender-queer, gender-fluid) identities.

-       Identify as Muslim (recognizing that Muslim identities are multidimensional, can identify religiously, culturally, spiritually etc., does not need to practice Islam)

-       Can be either permanent resident, citizen or resided in Ontario in the duration of their study

-       Had their mental health impacted (positive or negative experiences) due to access to services within the university's student affairs or LGBTQ+ specific departments/resource centres


The study will be a semi-structured interview. The demographic questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes to complete, and the interview will last about 60-90 minutes. During the interview, the interviewer will ask you a number of questions about your post-secondary experience, including questions about your mental health and experiences accessing services on campus. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board

(REB#8306), which receives funding from the Research Support Fund. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca.

Below is a survey link that includes the letter of information and consent form and demographic survey. Please read through it carefully and complete the survey.

[Insert Qualtrics survey link]

Regarding scheduling the interview, please fill out the Doodle poll (Insert Link) with your availability in the next two weeks, and I will schedule an interview time that works for us.

If you have any questions at any point before the interview, please don't hesitate to contact us!

Thank you and kind regards,

Bushra Ahmed (they/them)

**Appendix D**
**Demographic Survey Results Table**

| Variable | Category | No. of Respondents |
|---|---|---|
| Sexual Orientation | Lesbian | 1 |
| | Queer | 2 |
| | Pansexual | 1 |
| Gender Identity | Cis-Woman | 1 |
| | Non-Binary | 2 |
| | Gender Non-Conforming | 1 |
| Ethnicity | South Asian | 2 |
| | South-East Asian | 1 |
| | Other* | 1 |
| Faction affiliation within Islam | Sunni | 3 |
| | Ismaili | 1 |
| Educational Affiliation | Undergraduate | 1 |
| | College/Diploma | 1 |
| | Graduate | 2 |
| Mental health impacted positively/negatively while accessing institution's student services and/or LGBTQ+ specific services | Yes | 3 |
| | No | 1 |

**Fig:** Table representing demographic survey results of participants

**Appendix E**
**TCPS 2 Certificate**



PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS
*Navigating the ethics of human research*

TCPS 2: CORE

## Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

**Bushra Ahmed**

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

1002387213

Date of Issue: **4 November, 2019**

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