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Examining Social Relationships among Older Muslim Immigrants Living in Canada: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract: Social connectedness and engagement are particularly important among groups who are at risk of experiencing social isolation, such as immigrant older adults. The objective of our study was to understand the social relationships of aging Muslim Lebanese immigrants living in Canada by exploring their lives in their ethnic and wider communities. This study used a life course perspective and adopted a constructivist narrative inquiry to understand the diverse lived experiences of four older adults who immigrated to Canada during early adulthood. Participants engaged in a narrative interview and follow-up session in which they storied their lived experiences. Findings describe one core theme, cultivating social relationships through family, friends, and community interdependence, and three related sub-themes: (1) navigating and creating family interdependence and planting new roots; (2) family interdependence in later life: the important role of grandchildren; and (3) cultivating ethnic and local interdependence to support aging in place. The participants' stories provided an understanding of how culture, religion, aging, family, and immigration experiences interrelated throughout their life course and shaped their social relationships during later life. This study sheds new insight on the importance of culturally tailored activities and awareness about the social needs of immigrant older adults.

Keywords: culture; interdependence; life course perspective; older immigrants; religious minority; social relationships



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1. Introduction

Two key forces are currently shaping the demographics of countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): aging and immigration [1]. Like other OECD member countries, Canada has strategically used immigration policy to manage demographic trends over time [2] and now has an increasing population of aging immigrants. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information [3], older adults make up the fastest-growing age group in Canada; in 2017, 6.2 million Canadians were 65 years of age or older and this number is estimated to double by 2036. Alongside a rapidly growing aging population, there are approximately 7.5 million foreign-born individuals living in Canada, with approximately 300,000 new immigrants entering Canada each year since 2015 [4]. Immigrants now represent approximately 30 percent of the country's older adult population [5].

Canada's changing demographics have prompted a drive for researchers to understand the needs of ethnically and religiously diverse aging immigrants [6–8]. Our study examines the experiences of aging Muslim Lebanese Canadians to understand what has shaped their social connectedness and engagement across the life course. Immigrants of ethnic and religious minority are one of the most vulnerable groups in Canada, as they fall into a triple jeopardy through the intersectionality of old age, immigration status, and

religious affiliation [9,10]. Intersecting identity markers, including race, class, gender, and ethnicity [11] shape older Muslim immigrants' experiences of social connectedness and social engagement. These intersections can lead to experiences of discrimination or exclusion in their new community [12]. Muslims have formed a growing segment of Canada's contemporary immigrant population [13]. The Lebanese community in particular, many of whom are Muslim, has doubled in size in Canada since 2001 [14] and is likely to continue increasing given recent and ongoing arrivals of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and private refugee sponsorship programs [15]. In 2016, 219,555 Canadians identified as Lebanese [16].

Immigration can be considered a major life transition because immigrants may experience acculturation stress, intergenerational conflicts, and depression [17–19]. Scholars point to social isolation and loneliness as being public health risks among older adults, especially among immigrant older adults, as they face many challenges when working to re-establish ways to engage in meaningful social activities in an unfamiliar cultural context during later life [20–22]. Building and maintaining strong supportive social relationships with family and community members have been shown to prevent stress, facilitate belonging, and provide access to important social supports among immigrant older adults [23,24]. How older immigrants build and maintain social relationships is not well understood; therefore, this paper aims to describe the experiences of social connectedness and engagement within one immigrant group, Lebanese Muslim Canadians, who immigrated in early adulthood.

Toepoel [25] drew on the works of Bourdieu [26,27] and Coleman [28] to explain that social connectedness is the quality and quantity of social relationships. Social engagement refers to a person's participation in activities with others or the wider community [29]. Social connectedness and social engagement are interrelated, as social ties provide opportunities to engage in social activities, which can create an environment promoting social networks and feelings of belonging. For older Muslim Lebanese Canadians, immigrating from a collectivist culture can shape the forms of social connectedness and engagement sought in the host society. Collectivism is characterized by collectivistic self-representation, linked to contextual obligations, and is motivated by the expectations of groups [30,31]. Navigating ways to maintain connectedness, traditional practices, and religious identity when moving from one country to another is an important goal for many aging Muslim immigrants [32,33]. Furthermore, collectivist social connection and engagement, characterized by forms of interdependence (e.g., multigenerational households), may require cultivation by immigrants arriving in more individualistically oriented societies such as Canada.

Arriving in a new country can result in Muslim Lebanese immigrant families experiencing loss of social support and increased stress because they have shifted away from relying on extended family in their homeland [30,31]. Furthermore, Ajrouch [34] found that family was the first source of social support for many participants in her study and that access to diverse sources of support beyond the family unit was limited. Similarly, Oglake and Hussein [35] found that aging Muslim immigrants experienced belonging in a close community ethnic group who assisted in information exchange and employment opportunities, which also led to social isolation from the wider community because they spent more time within their ethnic groups [35].

Aging Muslim immigrants may maintain social connectedness and engagement in old age by engaging in caregiving responsibilities, which was found as beneficial for both grandchildren and the older adult [36,37]. Caring for their grandchildren was a way for them to preserve their cultural and religious identities because they engaged in passing along traditions, culture, and language to their grandchildren. Maintaining a strong ethnic identity has been found to be connected to gender-specific roles for care tasks for aging Muslim immigrants [12]. For example, care migration among Bulgarian Muslims is a female-dominated role; however, a rising demand for more help from their adult children presented a new role for grandfathers, who also migrated for care obligations. While caring was perceived as a stigmatized role among men, they became more socially engaged in educating their grandchildren [12]. De Jong's [37] study also revealed the

importance of gendered intergenerational kin relationships and tasks after marriage in relation to identity among Muslim older adults. Aging Muslim women often cared for adult children and grandchildren, and supervised homework, while aging Muslim men cared for grandchildren and engaged in leisure time and outdoor tasks [37]. Aging Muslim women were found to care for their spouses who were experiencing health issues and men cared for their grandchildren and family finances [38].

Social connections and social engagement can promote wellbeing and provide opportunities to engage in social activities, which facilitates a sense of identity [39]. More research is needed to understand how social relationships are built and maintained over time as Muslim immigrants age in Canada. This study sought to unpack narratives of older Lebanese Muslim women and men to examine their experiences of immigrating and settling in Canada, with a focus on how they built and maintained social relationships as they aged.

2. Materials and Methods

Our study was conducted in London, Ontario, Canada, which has a relatively sizeable Lebanese population. We used narrative inquiry to address the purpose of this study for several important reasons: to examine various periods in an individual's life span; to unpack a wide range of social, environmental, institutional, and political influences; and to rebuild perspectives and actions that are connected to meaning making in place and time [40,41]. Thus, narrative inquiry was used to understand the lived experiences of older Lebanese Muslim immigrants by eliciting stories to investigate and understand how they made sense of their social relationships over the life course [42]. Narrative methodology addresses how people give meaning to their experiences [43] and enabled us to capture how the participants navigated their social connections and engagement with family, the Muslim Lebanese community, and the wider Canadian society across diverse contexts.

Subjectivity and reflexivity are two important components of qualitative research that were applied in this study [44]. Subjectivity was applied by bringing in our own histories, assumptions, values, and perspectives into the research design and execution [44]. In addition, we asked each participant a broad question in order to prompt their life story. We engaged in reflexivity throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing stages by paying attention to the ways in which our positionalities, assumptions, and perspectives influence the research and participant data. With our continued on-going self-evaluation and awareness during the research process, we were able to achieve rich rigor, sincerity, and transparency [45].

Grounded by a life course perspective that posits that lived experiences are socially constructed, connected to social change, and developed over time [46], four stories were co-constructed by the first author and participants. This perspective supports a holistic approach to lived experiences that does not examine age in segments [47] and considers participants' agency in constructing their own life course through the decisions and actions they make when challenges or opportunities arise. Participants chose, interpreted, and emphasized different aspects of their lives using their own voices, filtered through what they remembered from the past, present, or envisioned for the future [48]. The first author's positionality as a Muslim Lebanese Canadian young adult helped build rapport as all participants developed an immediate connection with her through shared religious and cultural identity. We purposefully recruited four participants for this study using the following inclusion criteria: English or Arabic speaking, Muslim immigrants from Lebanon, 60 years of age and over, and immigrated to Canada in early adulthood. In our study, we based our sample size on four important qualitative research factors: study purpose, paradigm, epistemology, and methodology [49]. The purpose of our study was to provide in-depth insights into how aging Muslim immigrants navigated their social relationships when living in an unfamiliar place. We selected participants based on purposeful sampling; thus, we selected specific individuals who could provide rich data that would help answer our research question. To promote gender representation, we recruited two men and

two women, and we were able to intensely study their lives. This sample size is reflective of other studies adopting a similar approach, as “often narrative inquiry research has a few participants, sometimes only one but more commonly 4–6 participants” [50] (p. 3) For instance, other studies [51–57] each had one to five participants in their research. Further, in conducting multiple interviews with each participant, our findings are drawn from data across 12 transcripts. All participants immigrated to Canada during the 1950s–1970s, and their age at immigration ranged from 14 to 25 years. At the time of the study, their ages ranged from 63 to 86 years. The study received ethics approval from Western University, and participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Stories were co-constructed with participants through narrative interviews using Wengraf’s [58] biographic-narrative approach. This method entailed three meetings with the participants to conduct one broad narrative interview, one follow-up interview, and one collaborative session to discuss the written narratives. The interviews ranged from approximately 30 to 180 min. The narrative interview involved an initial prompt, “I would like you to tell me your story about immigrating to Canada and then continuing to live here. Once you settled in London, Ontario, how did you get to know people around the community? What sorts of social activities do you do with others in the community, including your family, friends, and others?”. Participants were able to create a long narrative connected to past, present, and future events [41]. The aim was to elicit a broad narrative through which participants shared stories about their immigration and how they became and remained socially connected over time. A preliminary analysis of each participant’s initial story was completed, and a list of questions was formed for the follow-up interview to elicit further narrative data. The third, collaborative session entailed giving participants a re-written narrative account of their story and discussing it with the participants to ensure that their stories and voices were appropriately represented [58].

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber [59] holistic content approach was adopted to analyze all parts of the participants’ stories and form a whole narrative. Stage one involved transcribing the interviews and writing reflexive notes pertaining to social connectedness and social engagement, such as family values, language barriers, occupations, social environment, or challenging experiences [59]. We examined each participants’ data together and identified key ideas and threads. Stage two entailed applying a holistic-content perspective by initially reading through each transcript several times, and then considering all transcripts together, looking across participants for key ideas, quotes, contradictions, unusual remarks, and important events, activities, and places. All transcripts were then coded in Quirkos [60] using an iterative coding structure based on the ideas and codes we had developed during these first stages of analysis. The results of this process were discussed amongst all authors who engaged in a process of collective reflexivity [61] to generate further reflexive notes about initial findings. We outlined an overarching theme and associated sub-themes and revisited the data to describe and refine the themes. Stage three included interpreting and “restorying” the narratives into a framework. Our approach is similar to that adopted by Cho [52] and Shemirani and O’Connor [51] in their study of the narratives of immigrant older adults living in North America, in which narratives were not constructed temporally, but instead focus on what was emphasized, meaningful, or commonly intertwined throughout each story regarding social connectedness and engagement [62].

3. Results

Before describing the core theme and related sub-themes we introduce the four participants by sharing summaries of their stories to provide some context for the findings from our thematic analysis.

Mahmoud Abbas was in his mid-80s and lived with his wife. He immigrated to Canada in the 1940s with his brother and mother at the age of 15. He described how there was a small number of Lebanese people living in London before his arrival, who gave him and his family hope, a sense of belonging, and feelings of comfort. This drove his

passion for helping newcomers find their place in London and motivated him to become socially engaged in cultural and religious groups. Mahmoud became an entrepreneur and owned different businesses in the city. He described himself as hard working, and it became his purpose in life to keep people socially connected and engaged in the community. Throughout his narrative, Mahmoud emphasized the importance of his family supporting him in all his endeavors and that he would not have come so far without them, and Allah's (God's) will.

Aya Abdul-Karim was in her early 60s, retired and living with her husband. Her sister sponsored her to immigrate to Canada when she was 19 years old, and she described her settlement process as a shock. Despite living with several family members, she often felt lost and misunderstood; thus, she actively worked to find herself within her new context. Aya reflected on her multiple struggles and challenges raising her children in the Canadian context, and how she was able to work through many issues with support from her neighbor and best friend. At the time of the study, she spent most of her time caring for her grandchildren and being with her family and friends. She also emphasized how her understandings of the Quran facilitated her social connections within the Muslim and broader community.

Ali Hussein was a retired grandfather of four in his mid-60s. He lived in a multigenerational household with his wife, a few of their children and a grandchild. Most of his children were married with families of their own and lived in the same city. Ali immigrated to Canada when he was 19 years old to live with his uncles who were business owners, later becoming an entrepreneur himself. He lived transnationally, moving back and forth between Canada and Lebanon over time. Ali felt as though his societal contributions had earned him his retirement and reflected that the most important thing in his life was the happiness and health of his family; thus, he strove to help them in any way that he could.

Nabila Jamal was in her late 60s and was the primary caregiver of her husband who was diagnosed with dementia, having lived in London for about a year at the time of the study. Nabila was 14 years old when she immigrated to Canada with her parents and sibling after the civil war in Lebanon and returned to their home country years later. Nabila got married and had children, but ultimately returned to Canada, settling in London with her brother before eventually getting remarried and moving to another province. She worked hard in multiple jobs, while raising her daughter. As Nabila aged her daughter grew up and moved away, she tried to keep herself occupied and returned to London with her husband in order to be close family and friends.

3.1. Cultivating Social Relationships through Family, Friends, and Community Interdependence

All participants migrated from Lebanon, a country known for its rich collectivist culture, to Canada, which participants described as being characterized by an individualistic culture. Accordingly, all participants enacted deeply rooted collectivist values, such as living near or with extended family to preserve and protect relationships, organizing family gatherings at meaningful places, and engaging in social activities within and outside their ethnic community. They expressed difficulty adjusting to the lifestyle when they first arrived in Canada, and actively worked to create interdependence in their communities. The core theme identified in this study outlines ways that participants cultivated family, friends, and community interdependence to support their integration and inclusion in the host society. This core theme is supported by three sub-themes, including (1) navigating and creating family interdependence and planting new roots; (2) family interdependence in later life: the important role of grandchildren; and (3) cultivating ethnic and local community interdependence to support aging in place. Together, these thematic findings illustrate how the participants sought to create an interdependent way of living in their new country through various meaningful ways. For example, participants integrated by re-establishing and/or establishing social connections with family members and spent most of their late-life bonding with their grandchildren. They also formed meaningful social connections with neighbors and interacted with others in their local community, which supported

feelings of inclusion. Participants described the hardships they faced after immigrating and adapting to their new environments, such as experiences of culture shock, lack of social interaction, and experiences of social isolation within and outside their family circle. To overcome these challenges, we found that they worked hard in unique ways to cultivate supportive family, friends, and community social relationships that helped support their integration over time and enabled them to age in place.

3.2. Navigating and Creating Family Interdependence and Planting New Roots

Family support during resettlement seemed to play a vital role in integration and provided a stable social environment to facilitate social connectedness and social engagement for participants. All participants arrived in Canada during young adulthood and received sponsorship to immigrate and social support from their family members. This support created a foundation for participants to gain a sense of belonging and feel included in their new communities. A foundation built on family support led to several opportunities for participants to enact meaningful activities, which helped to expand their social networks, and continued into later life. The participants narrated several ways that family interdependence shaped their experiences and helped them plant new roots. They described living with family members, particularly within multigenerational households, and how engaging in activities with family members (or not, in some cases) influenced their integration experiences. Beyond housing, family members supported their integration in other ways, such as providing economic, moral, and emotional support. Family members encouraged participants to become more socially engaged by contributing to their new community through volunteering, advocacy, employment, charity walks, donation, being a mentor, and attending community meetings.

All participants lived in a multi-family member household when they first immigrated to Canada. For some, living with family members was challenging because participants had to navigate relationships among family members within a foreign space. Close family supports shaped participants' experiences of settlement and integration. For instance, Aya explained that her sister sponsored her to come to Canada to establish family interdependence, "she kept saying 'come and visit me I'm lonely I wanna see you, I want my sister to come to Canada', I'm missing her so and I want to see her and see a different country. I just want to see my sister I go see different life". Aya lived with her sister for the first few months upon her initial arrival in Canada, which she described as being a common practice in her collectivist Lebanese culture. Like Aya, Ali lived with extended family members for a few years when he first arrived in Canada while he found his way around his new community and later purchased his own home. Ali described that receiving family support contributed to his sense of rootedness in Canada. Ali said, "I've always felt like I belong here, even though I have come when I was 20. I had my education here, I went to university here, I am from here. I never felt strange". Living arrangements for all participants changed after marriage as they moved to live in their own homes with their spouses. However, most participants still found ways to maintain interdependence with their family members while living apart. Later in life, many participants again lived in multigenerational households with their children and grandchildren.

Beyond the tangible support of providing a roof over one's head upon arrival, participants also spoke to the ways that living interdependently with family members provided additional supports. For instance, Nabila narrated how she left what she described as a toxic marriage in Lebanon in her early 20s, moving to Canada to live with her brother who she depended upon for immigration sponsorship, as well as financial and social support upon arrival. She expressed how much she valued her relationship with her brother and described the year she lived with him, as a young woman, as the "best year of my life". She seemed to appreciate both the support from her brother and the sense of freedom from the family she left behind in Lebanon, explaining: "When it was just me and my brother, we would go, come back and nobody would tell us 'Where are you?', 'Where were you?'". At this point in Nabila's life, her brother was her only source of social and emotional

support and she engaged in meaningful activities with him, such as watching movies, walking around the neighborhood, or going out for ice cream. In addition, Ali described the crucial role played by his family members in supporting his economic integration into the community. His uncles owned a business in Canada and with their support, Ali attended university and afterwards established his own retail store in London. Ali said, “So I came back to London, I had a lot of relatives and friends here and I opened my business, clothing, jeans and stuff in 1975 and stayed in London for a long time. I enjoy being in this city because it’s a city but it has a climate of a little town or village”.

Participants also described ways that their family members encouraged them to expand their social connections, such as participating in larger family gatherings or through volunteering at local community events. For example, Mahmoud’s sister, who was known in the local community as a passionate advocate for multiculturalism and who sponsored his immigration, advised him to build interdependence by becoming more socially engaged in the Muslim and broader local community. Mahmoud emphasized the importance of not forgetting his culture and religion; thus, he wanted to engage in activity that brought the Muslim community together. Mahmoud said, “So we come to this country, the country open the door. So we appreciate it but we are not going to forget our religion, our culture, we gonna work on it. I want the people not to drift away, like a melting pot, I want them to be involved and do better than we did. I feel I bring the people together ok, because I don’t want them to be isolated, I want them to be proud about where they came from”. Bringing people together for an important cause was something he embodied. He said, “After we registered and we start and the newcomers start coming in ‘55, we had the first convention in London. We had 1000 Muslims attending and it was the best ever we had in Canada. And 800 Muslims came from the US”. This convention motivated Mahmoud to continue supporting the Muslim community in any way that he could. He continued playing an active role in his community in his old age. For example, he became involved in helping Syrian refugees settle in London. Aya also engaged in activities that took place in the community; for example, she did a fundraising run for an important cause with her siblings and friend.

In contrast, family interdependence did not necessarily lead to the support needed for all participants when they first arrived in Canada. For example, while Aya initially lived with her sister, she described feeling she lacked the emotional support she had hoped to get from her. This led to feelings of discomfort, which she felt initially prevented her from gaining a sense of connectedness and belonging. Aya explained, “Instead of, I came to this country I needed her—like her expectation was I should know better. The way they do things that—it’s different from back home, you make one mistake they laugh, make you feel uncomfortable instead of telling you this is how it’s done this is what you should do. She also expressed feeling lonely, out of place and burdensome when living with her sister: “I did feel lonely a lot because they were kind of, I don’t know how to explain like my sister was busy with her family . . . Her life and they didn’t—pay attention to me much—Her expectation was me helping here”. Thus, Aya experienced family interdependence but not in the ways that she had hoped, pushing her to seek out alternative social opportunities by attending English school and joining social clubs at her local mosque.

Each participant experienced and cultivated interdependence differently, achieving social connectedness and engagement in their own ways. Participants lived with and depended on their family members to a certain degree, typically benefitting from family interdependence but at times feeling that support was lacking. Family members were found to have played an important role supporting participants’ immigration process, initial living arrangements, and were the first sources of social support providing a foundation for them to build a new life in Canada. Family interdependence, multigenerational living, and close family friendships acted as an important source of social support in most of the stages in their life-course. Ultimately, participants appeared to embrace family interdependence (with the exception noted above) as sources of social connectedness and social engagement,

which facilitated feelings of belonging over time. Participants built their social lives on these connections which followed them as they aged in place.

3.3. Family Interdependence in Later Life: The Important Role of Grandchildren

All participants expressed how their grandchildren played a key role in facilitating interdependence and their experiences of social connectedness and engagement in later life. In particular, the participants described how they transmitted important traditional and cultural knowledge to their grandchildren. They also discussed how they enjoyed spending leisure time with them. This intergenerational interdependence seemed to fulfill a sense of reciprocity among the participants.

Participants talked about the importance of fulfilling their care obligations by teaching their grandchildren as a way to build and maintain social connections. They all expressed that they were not able to spend a lot of time with their own children who spent most of their days at work. The participants were all retired at the time of data collection and expressed the significance of spending most of their time with their grandchildren, with whom they described having strong emotional relationships that profoundly shaped interdependence in different ways. For example, Aya talked about how taking care of her grandchildren four days a week filled her with positive energy: “And you fill up your life, you fill your life and the kids come”. She described how when her grandchildren visited, she would teach them how to speak Arabic and dance to traditional Arabic music visit. Aya explained how her grandchildren “complete” her life and keep her “young and active”, which made her feel that she was not in her old age. She experienced mutual interdependence with her grandchildren, who were constantly learning from her and provided her with regular and social engagement, which facilitated strong social connections with all her grandchildren.

Similar sentiments were shared in Mahmoud’s narrative as he spent most of his time with his grandchildren, and taught them about the Quran, how to read Arabic, and encouraged them to get involved in their local and Muslim community. Mahmoud offered his grandchildren wisdom and they in turn provided him with continued interdependence and a way to stay socially active. Mahmoud also mentioned that he enjoyed having all his grandchildren for dinner at least once a month, requesting that they put away their cell phones and focus on valuable family time. For Mahmoud, interdependence was further maintained through these monthly dinners because he and his wife also taught their grandchildren how to cook traditional Lebanese dishes.

Feelings of mutual interdependence did not only stem from teaching grandchildren important aspects of the Muslim Lebanese culture, but also involved engaging in leisure activities and having fun together. For instance, Ali expressed how much he enjoyed spending leisure time with his grandchildren, playing with them in the backyard and going on daily walks with them around the neighborhood, which kept him “involved seeing how they are doing”. Ali had several grandchildren under the age of five and he explained how these connections filled him with gratitude because he was still physically able to play and build social bonds with them. Ali said, “Yes actually this is the most important thing in life, your children. You feel happy when you did what you are supposed to do. Like money or anything, I don’t care about that, it can be reachable. But I care about their ethics and that we have raised decent people. So, I am happy for that, I think that is the main reason why I am quite satisfied”. He also enjoyed helping his sons with their businesses by giving them advice when they need it.

Mahmoud, Ali, and Aya were grateful they lived near their grandchildren because this allowed them to spend a lot of time together. Achieving interdependence with grandchildren was more challenging for Nabila whose daughter and granddaughter lived in a different country. Bonding with her grandchild was nonetheless also important to Nabila, who used technology to communicate with them and described how much she enjoyed video calling her daughter and grandchild. She expressed feeling unable to fulfill her role as a grandmother because she had to spend most of her time caring for her husband who had dementia, which prevented her from traveling to see her grandchild. Furthermore, unlike

the other participants, Nabila felt a sense of emptiness because she could not re-establish relationships with her two sons and their children. As mentioned earlier, Nabila divorced her husband in Lebanon and left her two children with her husband and his mother. She said, "I'm a mom. And they took my kids from me. Their father took them from me. When I see a mother buying toys for her kids, I get hurt from the inside. When I see a father walking with his sons, I look around and see a shadow and say where are my sons? Days, I would go outside and walk around, open the window, sit on the balcony, days I open the TV. If I screamed and cried, no one would know. I would ask myself questions, why did this happen to me?". Nabila said she tried to be a part of her sons' lives, but they refused to connect with her. Nabila hoped that one day she could connect with her children and grandchildren.

Aging in place helped participants build and maintain consistent social connections and engage in activities that supported their wellbeing. Most participants chose to stay in Canada for the very reason that their children and grandchildren were nearby. The participants all appeared to strongly value their role and identity as grandparents, which helped them gain a sense of inter-connectedness across generations.

3.4. Cultivating Ethnic and Local Community Interdependence to Support Aging in Place

After immigrating to Canada, many of the participants' social ties initially diminished due to the absence of extended family and they navigated ways to establish new ties. In addition to the forms of family interdependence cultivated upon arrival and later in life described above, the participants also narrated ways that they built new connections that provided social support during their life course. They described seeking ways to contribute to their ethnic and local communities, resulting in social connectedness and feelings of belonging. Findings illustrated ways that they formed social connections within their neighborhoods, within their faith-based community with other Muslims, as well as with people in the broader community. These social connections often grew from their ties with family and friends who facilitated the participants' social engagement in the wider community.

As participants aged, they developed a range of relationships through which they gained support in their communities, facilitating interdependence and helping them develop resilience and a sense of inclusion. For example, Aya repeated several times a quote from the Quran, which helped her reach out to cultivate interdependence by forming strong social connections with her neighbors. She said "Prophet Muhammed, Peace Be Upon Him, said to be good and kind to your neighbors and you're more than a neighbor" and narrated how she and one of her neighbors had built a strong connection that had lasted for over two decades. Aya considered this neighbor as her own sister, explaining "She's the one who used to take me and sit with me [pause], not my own blood sister. She's the one. And my sister wasn't that far away from me [geographically]". She expressed that her life would be different if it did not include being socially connected and regularly engaging with her neighbors, for example, by exchanging cultural meals and recipes with them, and looking after each other's homes (e.g., collecting mail) when they were on vacation, which provided feelings of safety and social inclusion. Participants described not only their connections to their neighbors, but also within their neighborhoods more generally. Ali had lived in his current home for nearly a decade and talked about how much he liked the nearby amenities, making it was easy for him to drive to a café every morning where he met his friends to socialize about the community and politics. Ali said, "It's a nice quiet neighborhood. Everything is nearby, Tim Hortons, restaurants, Food Basics, shoppers drug mart, you have a lot of services". The café was a meaningful place for Ali, where he could enact important social activities with his friends and relatives, which promoted his level of social engagement. He stated, "I'm retired now I don't do anything . . . , except having coffee and playing cards. Having coffee everyday with friends". Like Ali, Nabila moved to London in her old age to be among her relatives. She said, "The people who stay happy live among those from their village. You reminisce about the past together, the children of

your country, you live together, weddings you are dancing together, you are happy. We play cards, we play with everything, and we are all happy is what I mean. See the child of my country, my village, we were raised together and drank from the same water, and we walked on the same road". Despite being among relatives, Nabila mentioned that she has yet to build relationships with her neighbors.

Beyond their immediate neighborhoods, practicing their Muslim religion fostered participants' social connections and engagement, encouraging them to volunteer and participate in faith-based community gatherings and associations. For example, Aya made her first social connections at her local Mosque, where she learned to cook cultural foods. She volunteered at the Mosque, an important activity she continued to do as she aged. Aya said, "We were all working really hard at the mosque making fatayer, making zatar, umm dinners, everything! And that's how we learned, and I got to know people that way". Through these social connections and engaging in meaningful activities at the mosque such as cooking, socializing, organizing dinners, and cultural bazaars, Aya mentioned that it helped her become a well-known member of the local Muslim community. She continued her involvement at the mosque while raising her children, who also took on similar roles in the community when they grew up. Mahmoud was also highly connected to the Muslim community. He narrated how upon his arrival, the existing Muslim Lebanese community, whom he referred to as "the pioneers" were involved in social and political activities and inspired him to strive toward fostering community interdependence: "These people they made us feel welcomed. They didn't ignore us, they make us feel comfortable and they said, "Canada is the best country, you are lucky . . . you are with us now and you are going to have a tough time to adjust for the language or the weather but we went through too so . . . just keep on going . . . you know they give you that lift and they make you feel proud, we are very fortunate". In the spirit of paying forward the generosity he experienced, Mahmoud, members of his family, and the larger Muslim community established cultural and religious clubs in the city. They cultivated community interdependence by working together and subsequently by participating in these organizations. Helping others and showing them ways to become more involved in social activities within the Muslim community had been one of his lifelong goals.

Ways that participants became involved in the broader community were also described. For example, Aya talked about participating in fundraising events and volunteering with her sister and adult children. She was repeatedly involved in an initiative that distributed food for the homeless around her community every year and volunteered for a Syrian refugee support group. She explained how engaging in such activities helped her build a strong social network and helped her make a difference in people's lives, which fostered interdependent relationships within her community. Finding ways to becoming involved within the broader community seemed especially important for one of the participants, who had left the city and returned years later, leading to a sense of social exclusion from the local Muslim Lebanese community. Nabila explained how she enjoyed attending traditional Lebanese weddings but felt unacknowledged by friends, "There are people who pass by me, and we use to be good friends. They pass by and put their heads in the ground. And they don't speak with me. I was friends with them since I was little, I mean like in Lebanon". Despite having more recently relocated to London, she lived among most of her relatives now, but still expressed feelings of loneliness and disconnection from her ethnic community. Not having been able to re-establish interdependence among her ethnic community, she invested most of her time in the quality of the few relationships she had.

For all participants, it was clear that a critical aspect of aging was gaining a sense of connectedness and belonging with others. When moving to a new country, many worked towards building interdependence by creating places of meaning to socialize with family and friends, which supported their continuity in later life. Cultivating and maintaining forms of ethnic and local community interdependence was essential to enhancing their sense of belonging to the community. Participants worked hard to achieve interdependence

with their family, friends, and local community members, which supported stability and aging in place.

4. Discussion

Our study explored social relationships among older Muslim Lebanese immigrants living in London, Ontario, Canada. Findings illuminated many ways these four older adults built and maintained social connectedness and engagement with family members and individuals in their ethnic and local communities over the life course. Rather than emphasize the number of participants, we highlight the number of data collection points. We drew our data from interviewing each participant three times; thus, we analyzed 12 interview transcripts. We were able to deeply understand what factors shaped, supported and hindered participants' experiences when actively working to rebuild their social networks. Our results, derived using narrative inquiry, add new insights to the literature on older adult immigrant minority groups, particularly concerning the critical role of family members, including immediate and extended family members upon arrival, as well as grandchildren in later life, and of neighbors and community members more broadly, including those within and beyond the Muslim Lebanese community.

A large part of each participant's narrative revolved around cultivating interdependence with family members, which provided social and moral support and facilitated feelings of belonging, safety, and comfort. Participants socialized primarily with family members and expressed that the most important aspect of their lives was their family members. Similarly, Palmberger's [39] study found that visiting family members was an integral part of Muslim older adults' everyday life, which supported social connectedness. Fallor and Marcon [32] also found that family became a direct source of informal support that supported wellbeing for Muslim Lebanese living in Brazil.

Our study contributes new knowledge regarding the major role that grandchildren may play in the lives of older adults, as participants spent substantial amounts of time providing care, sharing knowledge, and spending leisure time with their grandchildren. Research shows that activities of aging Muslim immigrants often involved playing and spending time with their grandchildren [63]. Grandchildren were also found to be a source of care and emotional and social support and influenced aging Muslims' quality of life [64]. In the current study, the participants assumed traditional gender roles as well as challenged them. For example, grandfathers seemed to embrace a close and caregiving role with their grandchildren. This reflects findings from research with other immigrant ethnic groups, such as a study by Guglani, Comeman, and Sonuga-Barke [65] which found that Indian immigrant older adults who lived in Britain expressed their cultural and ethnic identities through connecting with grandchildren and passing on cultural traditions. Similarly, Zhou [66] found that Chinese immigrant older adults associated their identity with the ability of their grandchildren to remember their heritage and speak their language of origin. In both studies, practices of passing on their ethnic identity to their grandchildren was a way they built and maintained social connectedness and reflect our study findings.

The literature suggests that older immigrants of various ethnicities are profoundly connected within the boundaries of ethnic enclaves [67–69], which not only serves to combat social isolation and feelings of loneliness [70] but also shapes their experiences of social connectedness and social engagement [71,72]. We found a similar pattern among all four narrative accounts, as each participant expressed how their family and Muslim Lebanese community worked to facilitate social interactions and build close quality relationships, forming their own social enclaves, which helped build resilience. Resilience is often defined as a personality characteristic, which describes an individual who can adapt to difficult circumstances and stay optimistic [73]. In the context of immigration and aging, resilience was present in all the participants' narratives as they worked to cultivate the various forms of interdependence highlighted by our findings. Additionally, we found that participants established relationships and engaged socially with individuals outside of their Muslim community, including neighbors of the same gender and life

situation. These relationships sometimes supported participants in everyday ways that family members could not, especially when family members lived at a distance. Many other articles (e.g., Buffel & Phillipson, 2011; Morioka-Douglas, Sacks & Yeo, 2004; Oglak & Hussein, 2016) [35,74,75] reported that aging Muslim immigrants did not form relationships outside of their ethnic enclave, which limited their social connectedness and engagement with the wider community. However, our findings demonstrate ways in which older Muslim immigrants pushed beyond the typical limits of ethnic enclaves and built and maintained relationships with individuals in their wider community [76].

Findings from this study contribute to the literature regarding aging in place. Participants built and maintained a collectivist support system in Canada's generally individualistic society through engaging others, particularly with members of the city's Muslim Lebanese community. Participants harnessed and developed their skills and built new networks through engaging in meaningful activities and sharing their embodied cultural heritage with others, in places such as the neighborhood, community centers, and the mosque. Religiosity and culture also shaped their experiences of social connectedness and engagement, which is consistent with findings in prior research with various religious and ethnic groups [76,77]. Through these experiences, participants expanded their connections with other Arabic-speaking people, which was another way participants built and maintained social connections.

The co-constructed narratives and themes revealed how older Muslim Lebanese immigrants positioned themselves in Canadian society over time and how aspects of their life course, such as social connectedness and engagement were shaped by forms of interdependence cultivated over time. The life course perspective helped to interpret these findings. Immigration is a life course transition and may influence how individuals build and maintain social connections with family, friends and communities as they try to navigate new territory and establish roots [78]. Socially connecting with others and engaging in activities as they established their lives in Canada was critical to the participants' wellbeing, especially when participants moved towards old age. The study findings also relate to the life course perspective principle of agency, which involves individuals constructing their own life course through the decisions, choices, and actions they make when opportunities and challenges arise [46]. The current study participants were active agents as they established social connectedness and engagement. Further, the life course perspective principle of linked lives involves the idea that individuals live their life depending on one another, with socio-historical influences playing a large role in their network of interdependent relationships [46]. For this study, findings revealed that social relationships and networks shaped participants' lives by giving them the opportunities to find places to express their identities and fostered participants to become more socially engaged in their community. The study also discovered that experiences from early adulthood were the foundation for connections in later life for all participants. Some participants were raised by their parents to be proactive and become involved members of the community, while others had a difficult time making new friends as they integrated.

A few limitations of the current study should be considered when further interpreting the findings. The interviews were conducted by the first author, a young Muslim Lebanese female, whose cultural positioning may have influenced what the participants decided to share with her. Additionally, as participants were recruited through a mosque, potential participants fitting the inclusion criteria who did not attend the mosque and whose experiences of social connectedness may differ as a result, were not recruited. Future research on social connectedness and engagement among aging Muslims should seek a maximum variation sample that could reflect a more diverse range of experiences related to religious and secular aging Muslims.

5. Conclusions

Our study worked towards valuing and understanding a local Muslim Lebanese culture in London, Ontario, particularly focusing on how family and community interde-

pendence are interrelated with experiences of social connectedness and social engagement. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion on immigration, aging, and social relationships and adds to the limited but growing literature on religious minorities in Canada.

Our study illustrated how strongly valued interdependence was woven throughout experiences of building and maintaining strong social ties for older Muslim Lebanese Canadians. In understanding this group's social relations, it is important to note how they also worked to maintain and strengthen their city's Muslim community. Our research showed that multiple factors contributed to how and why Muslim immigrant older adults built and maintained social relationships involving a complex negotiation between collectivist social thinking and individual agency. Being Muslim was a major and direct source of how the participants built their social networks. This narrative study provided insight into how older Muslim Lebanese Canadians built and maintained social connectedness and social engagement, especially how they gave meaning to diverse social experiences throughout their life course.

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