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Abstract

Egyptian Muslim postgraduate students carry their identities, memories, and affiliations with them when moving from an Islamic country to a Western country and face many challenges in re-identifying and representing themselves in their new context of living in the diaspora. This research investigates how postgraduate students living in the Egyptian Muslim Diaspora perceive their religious identity using qualitative methodology, in order to understand the nature of Muslim identity in relation to mobility and space. This study finds that participants perceive their religious identity as an individual characteristic, rather than a social one and previous experiences in the homeland greatly affect their sense of belonging. Participants also express their belonging to a spiritual territory, rather than a spatial one. The sense of estrangement that the participants experience living abroad provides them with a positive perception and appreciation of their own religious identity. Additionally, the participants express the fear of dynamism in their religious identity while living in the diaspora and they emphasize holding on to the fundamentals as their personal identity, while highlighting the decrease in their practice, justified by the absence of their social religious community.

Introduction

Mobility is a significant social event that attracts the attention of many researchers, as it is considered essential in understanding societies. Due to new waves of migration, new forms of diaspora have come into existence as individuals disperse from their homeland, whether forced or voluntarily, bringing with them their affiliations, memories, and emotions (Schumann, 2007). This migration flow has enhanced the area of

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research with new academic interest in the phenomenon of diaspora and how it affects different aspects of social life. One of the important areas of study is the construction and transformation of identities. A great deal of research has been conducted to explore the elements that constitute individual and group identity, how individuals prioritize certain identities, and how multiple identities exist (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). However, less attention has been dedicated to the study of how individuals negotiate their identities in different locations due to mobility and migration (La Barbera, 2015), especially in the case of the Muslim diaspora.

In exploring modern theories of identity and its relationship to mobility and space, many theorists have described the nature of identity as mobile, dynamic, and incomplete. On the other hand, religion, as a significant aspect of identity, has been characterized by some theorists as static, since it is associated with fixed or traditional beliefs. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of religious identity and to determine whether it is dynamic or static among Muslims in relation to mobility, this research investigates the religious identity of seven young Muslim Egyptians living in the diaspora. More specifically, it explores how these Egyptians perceive their religious identity after having lived in the diaspora, how mobility contributes to the shaping of their identity, and what the key components of this identity are in the context of diaspora.

Literature Review

Muslim Religious Identity

Religious identity, as an important aspect of human identification, has been defined in the literature through different approaches. By reviewing a number of recent empirical studies done in the area of Muslim religious identity in the diaspora, a variety of definitions of Muslim religious identity can be found. It is defined, in some studies, as the personal interpretation of Islam (Karim, 2016), which informs every action (Pineteh, 2017). It is understood as a subjective sense of self, similar to other types of self-identification (Mirza, 2013). Other studies define religious identity as a relationship between the self and religion, through self-conscious religious engagement (Dobson, 2013). Franceschelli & O'Brien (2015) define it as subjective orientations adapted by individuals which are then reflected into subjective understandings of beliefs practices. Pinto (2015) summarizes the definition of religious identity as a "social classification". What is common about these definitions is that they offer a more subjective, self-oriented way of defining the religious identity of Muslims. In other words, Muslim religious identity, according to these studies, has an adaptable definition that is affected by both the self and social surroundings rather than a pre-determined, fixed self-identification assigned by doctrine.

In terms of belonging and attachment, religious identity, according to other

studies, is understood through the lens of the Muslim *Ummah* or community. Being a member of this global group is considered a way of religious self-identification (Rytter, 2010; Maliepaard et al., 2010; Karim, 2016; Ali, 2018; Degia, 2018). Therefore, this is a type of social identification through a religious group or a collective identity (Finlay, 2019). These studies assign the religious identity of the self, mainly to the social group, which makes it less subjective to personal variation.

Some studies define it as religious ideas, rituals, or practices (Hopkins, 2010; Rytter, 2010), which can be similar to the definition of religiosity. These ideas are reflected in the reinventing self during through rituals. The practices can be seen as lived religion that is affected by the everyday context (Kapinga & van Hoven, 2020). Other studies define it is a continuous learning process, along with its practices (Langellier, 2010). These definitions limit religious identity to practices and rituals, without giving much weight to other important aspects of identity, like beliefs and the issue of belonging.

The Muslim Diaspora

Historically, the word diaspora has been primarily associated with Jewish exile. However, the term has been reused in social sciences to mean a dispersion of a community with a form of attachment or connection to the homeland. The Muslim diaspora, in specific, is defined in previously reviewed studies with a number of terms. Some studies identify it as forced immigration (Karim, 2016), life in exile (Saidi, 2019), and dispersal from the homeland with traumatic experiences (Degia, 2018), which are associated with a negative sentiment of movement.

Others define it within different forms of migration, as transnational migration and transitional mobility (Chen & Kerr, 2018), where identity, mobility, and belonging are interrelated (Ryan, 2014). Some studies focus on the aspect of attachment or belonging to the homeland. Ryan (2014) identifies the Muslim diaspora as a return migration, in which the physical return visits to the homeland are an important dimension of the diaspora, along with the spiritual connection. Elmoudden (2013) defines the Muslim diaspora as places where belonging is questioned. It can be concluded that the Muslim diaspora is the dispersion of Muslims through a type of movement, whether forced or voluntarily, and negatively or positively associated experiences, while still attached or connected to the physical or spiritual homeland.

The Muslim Diaspora as an Approach for Understanding Identity

Identity is said to be intrinsically tied to place (Malpas, 1999). The investigation of place is an essential aspect for studying identity, as Casey (2001) stated, "there is no place without self; and no self without place" (p. 406). Moreover, Dovey (1985) emphasized

that place is tied to identity and the issue of belonging and attachment in two dimensions: spatial and temporal. In spatial identity, the idea of home is an important aspect to the feeling of belonging to a special type of place, whereas temporal identity explains the feeling of belonging to familiar places that are associated with certain emotions in the memory of a human being (Godkin, 1980; Dovey, 1985).

Furthermore, human identity can be understood in relation to the changing of place (human mobility or migration). Since identities are constructed in everyday interactions and experiences (Gabriel, 2004), human mobility will expose the individual to new experiences with interpersonal relationships, leading to change in the understanding of their own identity (Easthope, 2009).

According to this relationship between identity, place, and mobility, the diaspora offers a substantial environment through which the identity of migrants can be investigated. Diaspora has to do with the here and there, the "here" is the physical place where migrants live and the "there" is where belonging and attachment are found, in the homeland. King (1995) suggested that migrants face the concept of duality, as they are tied to two places.

Muslim scholars identify the idea of diaspora in relation to Muslim territoriality; the Muslim homeland and the non-Muslim other (Albrecht, 2018). According to these scholars, diaspora is the territory of migration or exile, where Muslims live in a state of alienation, as the majority of society is non-Muslim.

Against this backdrop, Muslims who live in the diaspora are considered to belong to an imagined place of origin, held by a territorial place of reference. This place of reference includes all Muslim homeland territories, where they belong to a global Muslim community or *Ummah*, unified by a common faith and geographical boundaries (Albrecht, 2018). Muslim identity, especially in the diaspora, according to some Muslim scholars, is encouraged to remain static, in order to protect against dissolution from the secular society in the West (Albrecht, 2018). With reference to modern identity theories, as well as Muslim scholars' opinions about the dynamism of religious identity in the diaspora, this research sheds the light on the nature of Muslim identity by studying the mobility experience of seven young adult Egyptians living in the West.

Egyptian Migration to the Western Religious Context

To be able to understand the context of this study, first, it is essential to identify religious involvement and beliefs in the West. With the emergence of modernity, urbanization, and political changes, the engagement with religion has become remarkably lower than before (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). Most Western countries (except for the United States of America) that Muslim migrants select as their destination have become more secular. Despite nations' nominal religious affiliations, religio-

sity is uniformly distributed between atheism and orthodoxy, with low participation (Gorski & Altinordu 2008). This religious change that occurred in the West was described by Gans (1994) as "symbolic religiosity" that is reflected in the Western lifestyle, as well as political and economic orientations.

Muslim migrants come to these Western countries from comparatively strong religious societies where Islam is the most dominant religion (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). Moreover, they are seen by the West, especially the media, through the lens of terrorism (Schumann, 2007). The contrasts between these contexts has created a challenging environment for Muslims to embody their religious identities and practice their rituals.

In the case of Egyptian Muslims, the changes in political and social situations have challenged their religious identity as well. In the history of migration in Egypt, by the end of the nineteenth century, migration had become a general social phenomenon for Egyptians. After the elimination of Nasser's restrictive emigration policies, Egyptians tended to migrate mainly to rich Arab countries, however, in the last decades they began migrating more significantly to Western countries. Another pivotal political change that had a remarkable impact on the migration flow was the Egyptian revolution in 2011, followed by the military takeover in 2013. Now, with an estimated 3.4 million Egyptian migrants (Müller-Funk, 2020), Egypt has become one of the countries with the largest number of citizens that migrate to other countries.

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach to analyze personal experiences in the diaspora in the case of the Egyptian Muslims living in the West for postgraduate studies. Phenomenological analysis helps identify the patterns of behaviors and the feelings of the participants within a precise context and bounded environment of a human experience, and explores the meaning behind them (Creswell, 2013).

Study Sample

This research focuses its study on the case of Egyptian Muslims, who were traveling with a purposive reason and did not have the initial intention to migrate to the West. To limit the variables in the sample, students who were pursing postgraduate studies were selected. Seven participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique (Russell, 2006). Some participants were selected from the researcher's personal network, while others through the social or professional networks of some of the other participants. This method ensures a sample with fewer variables, since it provides participants with similar socio-economic status. To ensure that the study covers both

genders' experiences, the sample selection includes four female and three male participants.

The criteria for choosing participants included: (1) Egyptians living in a Western country, (2) traveling with a purposive reason (postgraduate studies), which ensures traveling and returning to their home country, and (3) sharing same religious belief, which is Islam. The participants were selected within the same age group (28 and 29) and are within the same educational level, as they are all doing postgraduate studies.

Interview Outline

This research uses semi-structured interviews to explore the feelings and beliefs in the diaspora experience of the participants. Through reviewing similar research and related literature, five main questions were conducted to guide the interviews: 1) How do you identify your religious identity? 2) What is the impact of mobility on your religious identity? 3) Who is/are your source(s) of support? 4) What has changed in your self-presentation? 5) Where do you feel a sense of belonging?

The interviews were conducted in a narrative structure. The narrative structure is a strategy principally to capture expressions of religious identity, which can be verbalized and reflected upon and contributes to an understanding of their often-invisible religious meanings and practices (Bruner, 1997).

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the pandemic situation, as well as convenience, the interviews were held using video calls. The interviews were conducted in the mother language of the participants, namely Arabic, in order to avoid any difficulty in expressing their thoughts and feelings and to guarantee more smooth narration and authentic responses. With the consent of the participants, interviews were audio-tapped, in order to enhance the accuracy of translation and transcription at a later time by the researcher. Each interview took between 30 to 45 minutes. In the beginning of each interview, the researcher provided a brief introduction about the research and emphasized its importance and the value of their contribution. The transcribed data was analyzed using the thematic data analysis method. The researcher reviewed the data, extracted meanings, and created themes of religious identity perception in the diaspora.

Results and Discussion

In this research, seven Egyptian participants, four females and three males, with an average age of 28, were enrolled. All of the participants live in Western countries, five were living in the UK at the time, one in Germany, and one in France at the time of the interview. They traveled for the purpose of studying postgraduate studies, four were

conducting their PhD, and three were pursuing their master's studies. All of the participants were single except for one who was married with one child, yet all participants traveled alone. Table 1 below outlines the main characteristics of the participants. The real names of participants have been held anonymous for privacy reasons. Through referring to identity theories, this research identifies four themes that explain the participants' perception of their religious identity in the diaspora.

Table 1. Main Characteristics of Participants

#	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital status	Place of residence in Egypt	Current Country	Date of leaving Egypt	Period of traveling away	Expected year back
1	Nora	F	28	PhD student	Single	Cairo	UK	Sept 2019	6 months	2022
2	Sara	F	28	PhD student Part-time researcher	Single	Cairo	Germany	Dec 2019	3 months	Not expected
3	Abdullah	M	28	Master's student	Single	Cairo	UK	Sept 2019	6 months	March 2021
4	Rania	F	28	PhD student – part-time T.A.	Engaged	Cairo	UK	Oct 2017	2.5 years	Not expected
5	Maha	F	29	Professional Master's-Internship	Single	Cairo	France	Sept 2018	1.5 years	Sept 2020
6	Samir	M	28	PhD student	Single	Port Said	UK	Sept 2019	6 months	2022
7	Ahmed	M	28	Master's student	Married with a child	Cairo	UK	Sept 2019	6 months	Jan 2021

Individualistic Characteristic of Religious Identity

Self-categorization theory explains how individuals perceive their own identity. According to Turner et al. (1987), individuals constantly categorize themselves into groups to which they belong (in-groups) and others to which they don't (out-groups). When they perceive themselves as a member of a certain group, in this case a religious group, they redefine themselves according to the norms, behaviors, and needs of this group. This process is called depersonalization, where self-perception is dominated by social identity.

Furthermore, self-categorization theory differentiates between social identity and personal identity. The former depends on belonging or membership to a social group through which individuals identify themselves. The latter depends on personal experience and is independent of any group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). This personalization of the self, or in other words, individualization, is determined by personal identity. Self-categorization theory suggests that individuals identify themselves on a number of levels including the individual level and the social level, according to the context and situation.

Using self-categorization theory, religious identity can be perceived as either a personal or a social identity (Vignoles et al., 2006). In perceiving religious identity as a personal characteristic, it implies the personal aspect of religion, for example, a personal belief or relationship with their God. On the other hand, perceiving religious identity as a social characteristic implies the communitarian aspect of religion, for example, the social participation in religion through group rituals.

In the research on migration and minority groups, it is motivating to understand whether they perceive their religious identity as a social or a personal identity. In this study, participants describe their religious identity as an individual characteristic, rather than a social belonging.

Samir: *In general, I feel that my religious side is not very obvious in my character. It is not obvious what my ideas are. I don't deal with religion in the social sphere. I consider it as an individual practice somehow.*

Sara: *Until now I have felt belonging to Islam itself not to Muslims. I don't want Islam to be identified by Muslims because we are human, we can make right or wrong actions a lot of times. Therefore, I don't want people to tell me that I belong to the group of a certain sheikh, so when he makes a mistake, they tell me this is your Islam. I don't want stereotyping.*

Maha: *When I go to the mosques here, it is mainly Moroccan mosques with old women, so I don't feel any belonging at all. Overall, I belong, of course, to the idea,*

but not to the people.

Participants describe their religious identities through belonging to their beliefs, rather than a Muslim group. One argument that can explain this perception is the unavailability of a group where they feel that they belong. Being a minority, in both religion and nationality, draws back the feeling of belonging to the religion that they believe in and by which their identity is formed. Categorizations within Muslim groups (such as Moroccan Muslims, etc.) create a number of out-groups to which some Muslims find it easy to detach themselves from, and as a way of avoiding any stereotyping.

Another suggested reason is secularization in the West, where religion is disregarded from the public sphere and is instead considered an individual practice. Some Muslim scholars, like al-Buti, emphasized the negative impact of these secular societies on Muslim religious practices and identity (Albrecht, 2018). For example, Al-Buti stated that Muslims are permitted to stay in a non-Muslim society, only if they are able to perform Islamic duties, which include personal as well as communal rituals (Al-Būṭī, 1968). Western secular systems promote the individualistic practice of religion and limit it to the personal sphere, whereas Islamic doctrine emphasizes the importance of social identity among Muslims. One of the participants described Western society and its impact on their religious identity as follows:

> Abdullah: *Here it is more materialistic, so the meanings are not present as much as it was in Egypt. I was surrounded by communities that always remind me but here no one does, so this affected me. I feel a little bit disgusted from the materialistic way of thinking here. This environment doesn't help me to be aware of some meanings (Islamic).*

Interestingly, Western societies, according to a study done by Brambilla et al. (2016), perceive their religious identity mostly on a social level. The social aspect is implied through group belonging, compared to non-Western societies, who perceive it mostly on a personal level. This study investigated the self-categorization of religious identity in six countries, three Western countries including UK, Italy, and Belgium, and three non-Western countries including Ethiopia, Philippines, and Lebanon. A possible explanation suggested by this study, is that due to the limited spread of religion, i.e., secularization, individuals tend to perceive their religious identity by means of affiliation with certain religious group. Their religious group is perceived as an in-group that can be easily differentiated from the out-group, which is the secular community. In that manner, religious identity is considered more of an extrinsic one, mainly instrumental and utilitarian in providing benefit for the group individuals.

On the other hand, non-Western societies, which are described as more religious, according to the study, perceive their religious identity as a personal identity. This is

due to the wide practice and spread of religion, which make it an ordinary thing pertaining to the majority of people (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). In this study of Muslims in the diaspora, although the participants now live in Western secular societies, they described their religious identity as an individual experience. Moving from a Muslim country to a secular one would suggest a change in the categorization of religious identity. Yang and Ebaugh (2001) suggest that moving from a religious majority to a religious minority could have a great impact on religious identity. This movement requires individuals to make extra effort in order to pursue the religion of their homeland, where they are a religious majority, to the diaspora where they are a minority. According to Yang and Ebaugh (2001), this condition would certainly increase their awareness and thus, strengthen their religious identity.

In describing the impact of moving from a religious majority to a minority, in this study, Maha states a strong relationship with her religious identity while in the diaspora, which she had described earlier as a personal identity. Nonetheless, it had a negative impact on her rituals, due to the absence of a social environment. She referred to herself in her homeland as a follower of her social community (in-group), which can be interpreted as a social identity, but after spending time in the diaspora, she relates her religious identity as her personal choice.

> Maha: *It is only the practices that have decreased, but I strongly relate to my religious identity, even if I don't practice. The social environment has a great effect on my practices…I was doing those practices out of habit and the people around me, so when I came here and all those conditions were eliminated and it became my choice, then, I chose not to do it in the same manner.*

However, this doesn't determine a change in the centrality of religion in their self-identity. The centrality of religion determines the level of religious integration in life. Participants describe how they perceive their religious identity differently in the diaspora, despite the challenges they face.

> Nora: *It is harder here, but it is better because it makes you question the things that you do for your religion. It refines your identity because it makes you think of the origin and the basics.*

> Rania: *Being distant from my family and friends might have given me more space to become closer to Allah. I saw different perspectives from Islam.*

In an attempt to understand the reason behind the change in the level of identity from social to individual, which, in a way, contradicts with the Brambilla et al. (2016) study, the nature of the religiosity in Egypt needs be questioned. It can be suggested from the interviews that religion in Egypt is perceived as a habitual practice rather

than a conscious one. Social pressure, mentioned as well, contributes to making religious identity a social one, without giving the individual the freedom, which is offered in the West, in choosing it as a personal identity.

Homeland Experiences and the Territory of Religious Identity

Religious identity while living in the diaspora can be understood from the lens of spatial and territorial identities. Spatial identities are dependent on the relationship between the individual's own space to which they belong and the space on the outside (Paasi, 2003). From Said's (1979) perspective, the concept of "imaginative geographies" determines the relationship between space and identity construction. It distinguishes between the familiar "our" space and the unfamiliar "other" space, beyond "ours" (Said, 1979 p. 54). This geographic boundary is related to symbolic boundaries, drawn by individuals, that provide an important space for belonging. In Islam the concept of *Ummah,* this is considered to be an imagined community to which Muslims belong beyond geographical boundaries.

According to Islamic legal discourse, territorial categorization is determined in order to identify the boundaries of belonging, which has an impact on the (re)construction of identity. Nonetheless, the criteria for determining *dar al Islam* or the abode of Islam, to which Muslims should belong, has been questioned nowadays. A modern Muslim scholar, Auda (2013), explains:

> The "Land of Islam" versus the "Land of War or Disbelief," "good ruler" versus "evil ruler," "security" versus "insecurity," "freedom in practicing Islam" versus "no freedom in practicing Islam," and "justice" versus "injustice," are all false dichotomies. There is no land anywhere that has any of the above features in absolute terms. In other words, the achievement of […] the three most fundamental [criteria] (security, freedom, and justice) is relative, whether in a Muslim-majority or a Muslim-minority society. (Cited in "How much of a 'Land of Islam' is Today's Europe?")

Moreover, some scholars even questioned the categorization of present-day Muslim majority countries as Muslim territories. Al-Shinqiti discussed that the secularization and oppression imposed by Muslim leaders in some Muslim countries would definitely question the validity of calling these countries the abode of Islam (Al-Shinqiti, as cited in, "Abode of Islam and Abode of War: Still Applicable?"). Al-Mawardi argues that the two basic characteristics of a so-called abode of Islam are security and freedom to practice Islam, which is not found in many Muslim countries (Al-Mawardi, as cited in Albrecht, 2018). Therefore, he views that the abode of Islam is not necessarily

determined by its Muslim population.

Reflecting on this argument, in this study, participants express their appreciation of freedom in the West that enhances the authenticity of choosing who they are.

Abdullah: *Truly the space of freedom is very big, and this is what I wanted to know about myself. I surely wanted to test myself. I test myself, not in the fundamentals, but on the subjects that are usually controversial in Egypt.*

The effect of limited freedom and the existence of both oppression and corruption in Egypt in the areas of identity and belonging cannot be denied. Participants explicitly mention the impact of the revolution, as an example of oppression, on their inner self as follows:

Abdullah: *I think that there are other factors that can have an impact on the area of identity, such as the revolution. If someone really lived and engaged with the revolution and then traveled, I believe it would be different from someone who didn't live the revolution and traveled. There are people, who lived the revolution and didn't travel and still have changed as well.*

Talking about the Egyptian revolution, Al-Hasni highlights in what way the Arab spring in 2011, when a number of countries in the Middle East created a revolution against their governments, revealed how far away these countries are from implementing Islamic law (Al-Hasni, as cited in Albrecht, 2018). This confirms the argument of Al-Shinqiti, that there is no true existence of a pure dar al-Islam or Islamic territory. Therefore, the sense of belonging to the religious identity of Muslims in their homeland may have greatly decreased and reached, in many cases, a great sort of detachment from it. Some participants express their perception of their detachment as follows:

Samir: *When I was a teenager, I used to look for Islamic groups. I used to go out with some of them, whether political or social groups, but this totally decreased in the past 7 years, [and] almost vanished. I am not like them and I am not happy with them.*

Abdullah: *I want to express my feelings that I am upset with Egypt, with people's understanding of religion and with their behavior that is based on that understanding. For instance, I want to express my sadness about the injustice that happens in the street. When I see that the oppressor is the one who overrides at the end, it echoes inside me, why didn't the oppressed take his rights back?*

Sara: I don't want to go back to Egypt because I am not happy with the community. One of the worst things in the community is the bad morals. It is not humane to hear someone who curses religion, flirting, abuse….

On the other hand, some participants emphasize their belonging and the benefits they have from their social environment in Egypt:

Rania: *I had a strong support system before coming here, and when I traveled it increased Alhamdulilah (All praise and gratitude belong to God). My upbringing and school have helped a lot. My friends have too. Maybe if I was raised in a different environment, my perception of my religious identity would have been different.*

Reflecting on what was cited above, it can be concluded that previous experiences in homeland have a great impact on religious identity in the diaspora. Having a supportive community back in the homeland helps to enrich social identity as a Muslim, through the feeling of belonging to a certain community back in their homeland. This guides an individual's behavior in situations according to the norms and the morals of that in-group community. On the other hand, having a negative experience with the community in the homeland creates a sense of detachment, which therefore, affects the perception of their religious identity, especially through the sense of belonging to their religious homeland community. As a result, individuals tend to identify their religious identity as a personal identity, disregarding spatial mobility.

Positive Impact of Living in the Diaspora on the Perception of Religious Identity

Some Muslim scholars emphasize the negative impact of moving from a Muslim majority to a Muslim minority on religious identity, others have suggested the positive development of this identity when living in the diaspora. Nayed (2010) suggests that the religious identity of Muslims should belong to a spiritual territory, rather than a political or geographical one. Dar al-Islam, according to him, is a concept of the inner being of a Muslim in this world, and a synonym for the otherworld after death (Nayed, 2010). He discusses that diaspora and continuous movement, in fact, allows a deeper understanding of the spiritual self and of belonging, through dissolving the concept of spatial territory and directing it to the otherworldly life.

Confirming the argument mentioned above, the participants in this study highlight the positive impact of living in the diaspora on their religious identity. Despite the challenges they face living in the diaspora, they still appreciate the development and stronger attachment to their identity.

Rania: *My sense of belonging towards Islam has increased since I came here. I wanted to know more about the Quran. For example, in Egypt, I didn't have the feeling that I always need to have a daily and weekly routine to learn and understand about the Quran, but here I felt I need to be connected to the Quran. When I*

used to find an Islamic lecture in Egypt, I would think that it was available every month and that I could go whenever I want. On the other hand, here, if there is an opportunity, I feel that I want more of it. I feel the need for it.

Reflecting on the above citation, Rania expresses her need for religion in terms of belonging. Due to the scarcity of religious communities, she enhanced her belonging to the religion itself. Yet, she expresses her need for a physical place where she would feel familiar, as in going to religious lectures. Another aspect that is highlighted by the participants in the diaspora, is the appreciation of their identity that differentiates them from the undesirable characteristics and behaviors of the rest of the community. Ahmed emphasizes his confidence in his identity that aids in protecting him from following his desires. Maha, as well, expresses her pride in her identity as it offers her a good way of living, compared to the surrounding environment.

Ahmed: *As for my feeling when someone asks me about my identity, I am very confident in answering. I am happy. I feel different from people around me. I feel that this feeling protects me from following my desires. I feel that it is an identity.*

Maha: *I was so happy to answer someone asking me about my hijab (veil) and I was very proud to talk about it. I feel proud because for me, Islam is a very good thing. It makes you pray five times a day which builds a relationship with Allah, that is a very good thing. This helps humans on earth. It makes them have a spiritual life and they are always connected with Him...*

Fear of Dynamism in Religious Identity While Living in the Diaspora

According to historical perspectives on religious identity, the nature of religious identity witnessed a change from being static and rooted to places of birth and family affiliations, to dynamic, characterized by mobility and flux (White & Wyn, 2004). Bauman (2001) identified the postmodern period as a "liquid modernity," which is characterized by the fluidity of people (through continuous mobility), ideas, goals, and identities. Everything is rapidly changing, leaving the individual with no referral identity from previous generations that fits with their identity.

Reflecting on historical perspectives in understanding religious identity, in this study, interestingly, participants declare dynamism in religious identity, yet they denied it from themselves:

Maha: *Of course the religious identity is dynamic, because nothing is static in this life. If someone changes his place, his identity will change with it, but for me, I am different. For me, it stayed static.*

Abdullah: *Religious identity is dynamic. I think that there should be a change at some point, but for me, I believe that Inshallah (if God wills) nothing will change with the fundamentals.*

Samir: *I see that the religious identity is dynamic. For me, I choose to stabilize things with all my mind and emotions. I choose to stabilize a certain definition for myself. Everyone has fixed things and changeable (dynamic) things. I feel that it is our choice or under our control whether it is a conscious or subconscious choice. I feel that it is dynamic, but for me, it is static. I believe that the general definition of the identity is static, but the details are dynamic.*

The reason behind the fear expressed above by the participants about having a dynamic religious identity for themselves, although they confirm that it is dynamic in nature, can be explained by a citation from Sara:

Sara: *If it is that I lose something from my identity every time I travel, I will lose myself at the end. I want to have an identity, a strong one.*

The third person effect theory is another theoretical viewpoint that can explain the differentiation in the participants' religious identity from others through describing it as static. Although this theory is mostly applied in mass-communication research, the basic premise of the theory can still explain the above-mentioned experiences. The third person effect theory suggests that people tend to perceive that certain social phenomena (in the case of this study, it is the fear of dynamism in religious identity) have a greater impact on the generalized others, than on themselves, based on personal biases (Davison, 1983). Yet, further research into this topic is recommended.

However, answering the question of whether religious identity in the diaspora is dynamic or static is controversial. Primarily, we need to come to terms with the definition of religious identity. Religious identity, in fact, has a variety of definitions in modern religious studies. In traditional religious studies, religious identity is identified as a commitment to a religion that defines a person's self-identification as a follower of this religion, as well as his beliefs and actions, according to the norms and rules of this religion. Yet, in modern studies, religious identity is presented as a form of affiliation. It includes spiritual orientation, awareness, and belonging to a group (Zuriet & Lyausheva, 2019).

Nonetheless, Muslim scholars identify Muslim identity with other key concepts. Scholars have agreed on a number of factors that construct Muslim identity including; the *shahada* (acknowledging the belief in one God and the prophet Muhammad as his messenger), *the Umma* (global Muslim community), social relations, everyday rituals and practices, and Islamic morals and values (Pratt, 2016). The main foundation of their identity is their belief (shahada), which includes the belief in one God, His angels,

His revealed books, His messengers, fate, and the day of judgment (Ramadan, 2003). These concepts are considered an appropriate description of Muslim identity among many Muslim scholars.

In this study, participants identify their religious identity in two categories, the fundamentals; which are the concepts of shahada, and the practices; which include the rituals. Describing religious identity in the diaspora, participants describe their identity as static, and according to some, it increased on the fundamental level, yet dynamic on the practice level.

> Maha: *I relate to my religious identity, that I believe in Allah, the Prophet peace be upon him, and I believe in one God. This hasn't changed through my mobility experience, but the practices; like prayer and the Islamic standard of clothing decreased. However, indeed, my beliefs haven't changed. Not at all.*

> Sara: *I still have the same beliefs, nothing has changed, only my practices, it is just a matter of less faith… When I took off my hijab, my faith decreased, but not my beliefs. My beliefs now are the same as when I was wearing the hijab.*

> Abdullah: *I didn't feel change in the fundamentals, yet in other things, I still face challenges.*

It can be concluded from the above citations that the participants hold on to the fundamentals of their religious identity on the personal level. However, it is hard to do the same on the social level where the practicing of rituals is fulfilled. At the same time, none of the participants is satisfied with this dynamism and they clearly argue that they haven't changed in general towards their identity, although they acknowledge religious identity, in general, is dynamic. This shows the importance of social identity in the diaspora and that it is an important aspect in the structure of Muslim identity in the diaspora. Finally, Sara in this study expresses her hope in not losing her identity and her goal to further enhance it:

> Sara: *I have a plan to become a better and stronger Muslim, I don't want to represent Islam, I just want to live day by day with what I believe in. I don't want to take some parts and leave the others. I hope that I would achieve the Muslim image people see, being well-educated and a strong worshipper with strong belief.*

Limitations of the Study

This study has a number of limitations. One of the limitations of the study is the sample size and profile. Choosing limited number of participants refrains any generalization on the whole population of the Egyptian Muslim diaspora. Besides, choosing a student profile sample is not sufficient for representing the Egyptian Muslim diaspora with its

various profiles. Finally, studying such a sensitive topic may include some biases, as the participants may not feel totally comfortable discussing their personal beliefs and feelings in the presence of the interviewer.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to understand Egyptian Muslims' religious identity in relation to their mobility, in the case of postgraduate students. Moving from an Islamic country to a Western country while carrying their identities, memories, and affiliations, Muslims face many challenges in re-identifying and representing themselves in their new context. Using qualitative methodology, this study reveals four main themes that can give insight into the perception of religious identity of Egyptian Muslims living in the diaspora. First, participants perceive their religious identity as an individual characteristic, rather than a social one. A suggested reason is due to the unavailability of a community to which they can belong. Additionally, living in the diaspora in a secularized Western community promotes a more individualistic religious life. Second, previous experiences in the homeland greatly affect their sense of belonging. Having a negative experience in their homeland community creates a sense of detachment, in the case of these selected participants. As a result, participants express their belonging to a spiritual territory, rather than a spatial one. Third, the sense of estrangement that the participants experience living abroad provide them with a positive perception and appreciation of their own religious identity. It differentiates them from the short comings in their surrounding community. Finally, the participants express the fear of dynamism in their religious identity while living in the diaspora. They classify religious identity on two levels, the fundamental level and the practice level. Furthermore, they emphasize holding to their fundamentals and referred to it as their personal identity, whereas they highlight the decrease in their practice level, justified by the absence of their social religious identity.

Based on these findings, it is clear that religious identity in the Muslim diaspora, in general, cannot be examined without considering the political and social history of the individuals. Undeniably, identifying the complex, multiple layers of religious identity is an essential step in determining its nature. Despite the fact that the findings of this study cannot be generalized due to the previously mentioned limitations of the study, yet, some insights about the Egyptian Muslim diaspora can be highlighted. The findings propose that in the case of Egyptian Muslim students, religious identity on the personal level, which is related to the fundamentals, is perceived by the participants to maintain its standing while living in the diaspora. The social level, which is related to religious practices, is perceived to decrease due to the absence of a surrounding community. Nonetheless, these perceptions are limited to this case study where the participants lacked a strong religious community in their surrounding environment.

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