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Muslim Youth Negotiating Boundary Maintenance Between the Sexes: A Qualitative Exploration

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Studies on Muslim youth suggest that they experience difficulties with balancing Western culture and Islamic religious norms. This study focuses on boundary maintenance between the sexes, which entails physical or social distance and avoidance of touching and gaze. These aspects of everyday social life are imbued with much symbolic significance and value. The study examined the values and norms on this subject that Muslim youth were taught and socialized into at non-formal Islamic education settings, and then compared these with values and norms conveyed at secondary schools in the Netherlands. Due to its exploratory nature, the study adopted a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 young adults and 28 students enrolled at secondary schools from four Muslim communities. The findings revealed that Muslim youth were taught and socialized into contradictory values and norms in these two learning contexts. While sex segregation was observed in non-formal Islamic education settings, participants' mainstream schools were coeducational. Islamic ethos as practiced in this community required physical and social distancing between the sexes, avoiding male gaze, and refraining from physical touch. However, at schools, boys and girls were expected to work in groups, interact, discuss, and socialize, and handshaking with teachers before lessons was observed at some schools as a ritual. Moreover, the study explored four pathways Muslim youth adopted as they negotiated such competing values: conformity to religious values, code-switching, peer surveillance, and breaking away. The findings have implications for the social and cultural integration, mental health, and wellbeing of Muslim youth.

Keywords

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Introduction

The limited studies on Muslim youth in the West suggest that they encounter daily struggles to reconcile societal expectations that have dissimilar values and norms from religious expectations (Elbih, 2012; Meldrum et al., 2014; Yip et al., 2011), and that they experience difficulties balancing Western culture and Islamic religious practices (Bartz, 2007; Cense, 2014; Goforth et al., 2014; Zine, 2008). This study focuses on boundary maintenance between the sexes and young Muslims' responses to explore these dilemmas. Boundary maintenance entails physical or social distance between the sexes and avoidance of touching and gaze. Certain acts that fall within this category, such as handshaking, have been assigned much symbolic meaning and value (Batum, 2016) and are subjected to intense political discussions (Berger, 2014). This study makes a unique contribution to our understanding of such boundary maintenance, as it explores the differences in values and norms conveyed on this subject at non-formal Islamic education (NFIE) settings and secondary schools in the Netherlands. This research examines how Muslim youth navigate possible contradictory messages from mosques and schools using their individual and collective agency.

NFIE encompasses a range of terms used in the literature, such as Qur'an schools, madrassas, mosque schools, or mosque education. In this study, NFIE refers to all forms of non-formal Islamic supplementary education provided by mosques or private tutoring institutions. This expansive definition includes private home tutoring for children (on an individual or group basis) and classes teaching Qur'an memorization and recitation, study of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic lifestyle norms, and rules of conduct (Berglund & Gent; 2019; Sözeri, 2021). NFIE is impactful among young Muslims, as they learn about Islamic religious doctrine and Muslim cultures and are socialized into norms and values about what constitutes acceptable behavior for a good Muslim (Altinyelken & Sözeri, 2019; Sözeri, 2021).

The Netherlands has one of the largest Muslim minority populations in Europe (around 5% of its total population), the majority having Turkish or Moroccan origins (Huijnk, 2018). It was once seen as a model for immigrant integration, yet multiculturalism has increasingly been viewed as a drama (Scheffer, 2000). Consequently, there has been a dramatic shift from policies aimed at multicultural accommodation to a focus on cultural adjustment and assimilation (Entzinger, 2014). In this context, Islam has been viewed as the key source of Muslim immigrants' so-called incompatible cultural traits (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2012). Some Muslims' refusal to shake hands with the opposite sex has been denounced publicly by certain politicians as incompatible with what they consider the 'Judeo-Christian values' of Dutch society (Berger, 2014), and has been viewed as a clear and visible indicator of failure or unwillingness to integrate. Some schools have also been confronted with this issue, when a few students or employees refuse to shake hands, prompting a range of discussions about whether the ritual of handshaking at schools interferes with freedom of conscience and religion (School & Veiligheid, 2020). Generally, restrictive Islamic morals are considered as incompatible with progressive and liberal Dutch norms, and Muslim communities' deviancy from such liberal norms has become a ground for questioning their integration within and belonging to the moral nation (Mepschen et al., 2010).

In a similar fashion, some Muslim communities tend to perceive Dutch society with comparable apprehension. According to a survey among parents whose children attended Turkish mosques in the Netherlands (Sevinc, 2012), Turkish-Dutch parents were anxious about raising their children in a historically Christian and increasingly atheist society. More than half of the participants in that study believed that the Dutch lifestyle and the values and norms it conveys might be harmful and inappropriate for the moral development of their children. While

acknowledging these concerns, this study's main point of departure is the potential distress caused by competing values and norms, and that distress's implications for the mental health and wellbeing of young Muslims. Indeed, some studies have underlined the danger of increased vulnerability to mental health distress, anxiety, and sense of feeling overwhelmed (Ahmed & Ezzeddine, 2009; Ahmed et al., 2011; Goforth et al., 2014). This study aims to generate further insights into young Muslims' daily experiences and struggles with negotiating multiple cultures in order to support the development of culturally sensitive educational programs and counseling services.

The study contributes to addressing a range of gaps within the existing literature; NFIE has been studied mostly in Asia and Africa (e.g., Bano, 2012; Boyle, 2006), while comparable studies in the European context are rare (e.g., Cherti & Bradley, 2011; Scourfield et al., 2013; Sözeri, 2021). Moreover, the implications of Islamic religious education in formal educational settings (e.g., at Islamic primary or secondary schools) have received much public and scholarly attention (Shah, 2012; ter Avest, 2020), yet there are very few studies examining NFIE (Cherti & Bradley, 2011; Pels, 2014; Sözeri, 2021). This omission is particularly salient considering that far more Muslim children attend mosque education (Sözeri & Altinyelken, 2019). Furthermore, despite their increasing number, there is limited knowledge about the cultural adaptation of Muslim youth in Western societies (Khawaja, 2016) and about its psychological impact (Ozbek et al., 2015; Stuart, 2014). The current study is unique, as there has been no prior research comparing the values and norms learned at NFIE settings with those acquired at secondary schools in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, existing research on Muslim children and youth in the Netherlands has focused on communities with Turkish or Moroccan backgrounds (Sözeri & Altinyelken, 2019; Pels, 2014), while this study incorporates the viewpoints of children and youth from Egyptian and Pakistani Muslim origins as well.

Contextual Background: The Netherlands

There are around one million Muslims in the Netherlands. According to the 2020 figures, the largest Dutch Muslim communities have Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds, numbering 410,800 and 408,800 members, respectively. Dutch Muslim populations originating from Egypt (26,152) and Pakistan (23,855) are relatively small minorities (Statistics Netherlands, 2020). The majority of Muslim immigrants arrived in the Netherlands in the 1960s as recruited labor. There are approximately 475 mosques belonging to different Muslim communities (Berger, 2014) and all offer some form of non-formal religious education (Sözeri, 2021). As in other European countries, these educational activities are independently organized and remain beyond the regulatory and supervisory structure of the state (Cherti & Bradley, 2011; Pels, 2014). Children tend to start attending this form of religious education at the age of 5, and they mostly continue until they finish primary education, at around 12 years old. However, some children continue with their religious education until they finish their secondary education, at around 16 (in vocational tracks) or 18 years old (in the pre-university track). NFIE is often provided in the after-school hours or during the weekends, and it may amount to 10 hours of teaching per week. Most of the religious education is provided by volunteer tutors who are considered knowledgeable about the Qur'an and who might speak Arabic; however, at some mosques, imams are also involved in teaching some groups of students. Students read and recite the Qur'an and study subjects that are considered central to Islamic practice, including Islamic law, philosophy, norms and values, and performance of rituals (Sözeri, 2021). There is no unified educational program, curriculum, or textbooks across the mosques, as even the mosques established by a specific national

group might adopt different pedagogical orientations (Sözeri & Altinyelken, 2019). However, it should be kept in mind that NFIE provided at mosques is a transnational endeavor, reproducing specific religious and cultural norms, values, and attitudes, and informed largely by the countries of origin of the particular mosque's attendees (Altinyelken & Sözeri, 2019).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Islamic Ethos on Boundary Maintenance Between the Sexes

The principles of boundary maintenance in Sunni Islam are based on the social concepts of relation and access. In Islamic law, a woman's most proximate male relations are considered *mahram*, meaning those whom she could not morally or legally marry. Those related by blood (such as father, brother, son, father's brother or mother's brother) or via marriage (such as a woman's father-in-law or son-in-law) are viewed as mahram, and (besides her husband) they are the only men a woman could be uncovered in front of or with whom she may have familial touch. *Namahram*, on the other hand, refers to anyone of the opposite sex to whom one is not related by blood. Touching namahram is strictly forbidden, but a man transcends this status with his bride with all the associated romantic and sexual attachment upon marriage (Ider, 2019). For both unmarried men and women, cultural norms prescribe formal interactions between the sexes and a lack of premarital intimacy, including avoiding touch and gaze. For a woman, being a good Muslim also entails refraining from attracting men's attention. Conversing with someone of the opposite sex in privacy might lead to gossiping about the nature of the relationship and might put one's reputation in jeopardy (Wray et al., 2014). These cultural norms prescribe legitimate conduct between the sexes and are conveyed as the "right way to live". A study in the Netherlands reported stronger adherence to gender segregation and the avoidance of physical and sexual contact between men and women among Dutch Muslim Sunni young adults compared to Christians (Beekers & Schrijvers, 2020).

To ensure legitimate boundary maintenance between the sexes, observing bodily self-discipline is important. However, Islamic religious education tends to observe rigid sex segregation, thus inhibiting direct interaction between the sexes. Groups are often organized by gender and students are taught by same-sex teachers (Cherti & Bradley, 2011; Sözeri, 2021). Sex segregation is justified on the grounds that co-education might lead to sexual tension; such tension is unwelcome and disruptive to learning. According to Paz-Fuchs and Ben-Shahar (2019), girls (after a certain age) and women tend to be considered as responsible for this sexual tension merely by their presence. The underlying message in these norms and practices conveys that sexuality is threatening, and that women are responsible for it. Zine (2008) contended that Muslim girls are regulated through a paradigm of honor and piety that is grounded in the puritan belief that women's bodies can create *fitnah* or discord due to sexual enticement. These messages are communicated to female students through rules and requirements regarding their attire, speech and behavior, and demarcation of gendered spaces within Islamic educational institutions or elsewhere, to avoid any *unnecessary* contact between the sexes.

Such conservative values and norms may lead to tensions at mainstream secular schools in the West because they could be incompatible with school facilities, ethos, and regulations. The way educational programs are organized at school could be considered unacceptable by religious students and/or their parents. Physical education is one of the subjects during which such tensions arise. Islamic rules governing body privacy require separate-sex facilities, but schools in Europe have traditionally been built with public changing rooms and communal showering facilities (Benn & Dagkas, 2006). Compulsory physical education in mixed-sex groups, having

a teacher from the opposite sex, or communal changing and showering facilities might even be viewed as a form of institutional discrimination against and exclusion of Muslim students (Benn & Dagkas, 2006). Consequently, scholars have argued that schools should accommodate the needs of religious minorities and promote inclusive policies by tolerating their unique practices, including sex segregation (Vickers, 2011).

On the other hand, other scholars have argued that sex segregation is harmful for children, especially for girls. According to Paz-Fuchs and Ben-Shahar (2019), sex segregation might imply that female presence in the male-dominated public sphere is undesirable, unwelcome, and even detrimental. As traditional gender roles disadvantage women, sex segregation might function as a social mechanism to limit girls' opportunities. The inferiority message that underlies such practices, if internalized by girls, may undermine their self-esteem and impede their psycho-social development. At the same time, sex segregation and the possible derogatory messages it conveys may create or reinforce misogynistic attitudes among boys. A 2016 inspection report for an Islamic school in the UK concluded that the sex segregation in this religious school was discriminatory. The report highlighted that sex segregation denied children the opportunity to interact with the opposite sex, and hence was detrimental to their developing relevant social skills (*HM Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills v The Interim Executive Board of Al-Hijrah School*, 2017). Batum's study (2016) in the Netherlands demonstrated that some young women who studied only with girls in Islamic primary schools had difficulties adjusting to the mixed-sex setting at the secondary education level, feeling uncomfortable and needing to constantly check their coverings and actions due to being in proximity with boys.

Negotiation of Competing Values among Muslim Youth

A number of studies have looked into how Muslim youth negotiate competing values in Western societies. The study by Williams and colleagues (2017) examined how religious organizations mediated and shaped sexuality and boundary maintenance between the sexes. Their study identified three organizational strategies: avoidance through gender segregation, self-restraint supplemented with peer surveillance, and classed disengagement. These strategies suggest that gender and sexuality must be explained and controlled in the process of cultivating proper religious dispositions. Avoidance requires organizing gender-segregated classes and activities, reinforced with adult monitoring to make sure that cross-gender interactions among unmarried adolescents are minimized. Modest clothing is also advised, and men are told to approach women with averted gaze. The second strategy, self-restraint, entails developing internal moral character to ensure that young Muslims make the *right* decisions when they study and socialize in mixed-gender environments outside mosques. Self-restraint may be accompanied with a sense of responsibility to undertake peer surveillance to ensure that fellow Muslims do not transgress certain boundaries. Although adult monitoring is implicated in the avoidance strategy, in the case of self-restraint, adolescents are counted on to monitor themselves. The third strategy, classed disengagement, points to a preoccupation with obtaining the best education and ensuring good life prospects, and not letting romantic attractions or relationship issues distract adolescents away from their studies.

A study by Cense (2014) with Turkish and Moroccan youth in the Netherlands identified four main pathways for reconciling conflicting norms: conforming to parents' values, breaking away from parents, leading a double/secret life, and integrating discourses. Some Muslim youth may conform to the moral codes of their parents (which may be rooted in Islam and/or ethnic culture of origin) because they do not want to disappoint or hurt them, and feel that they cannot live without their parents' support and love. They may voluntarily choose those values, or they

may feel unable to cope with the consequences of choosing an un-Islamic path. Some young Muslims, however, contest their family's Islamic, socio-cultural, or familial codes and reinterpret and modify them in line with their own values and convictions. This might involve breaking free from the social norms of home or the community, struggles with parents, and cutting contact. In the third pathway, young people develop multiple identities and belong to different groups, cultures, and value systems. At home they behave in alignment with familial and religious codes, but in other social contexts they lead a different life informed by different value orientations. Some young people manage such double lives and are able to switch between the two easily (code-switching), yet others feel alienated because of having different identities in different worlds. They report guilt feelings, fear of being caught, or remorse. Finally, the fourth strategy refers to integration of different values to combine different elements of familial, cultural, and religious influences, showing their connectedness with different social groups, and navigating divergent expectations (Cense, 2014).

In Batum's study on handshaking (2016), young Turkish-Dutch Muslim women's behavior depended on the ethnic background and/or religious orientation of the men they encountered. The study showed that even if non-touching is central in Muslim ethical formulations, some young Muslim women who believed in the non-touching precept did not apply it in non-Muslim settings, reporting concern that this could diminish their chances in the job market and would not be perceived as professional.

Methods

The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research approach, since it aims at obtaining insights about the perspectives and understandings of the participants, their subjective experiences, and interpretations (Neubauer et al., 2019). A qualitative angle allowed for a more comprehensive analysis than may be possible with a quantitative approach, by looking at a broad range of interconnected processes and causes, rather than focusing on predetermined, isolated variables (Saldana, 2011).

Participants

The study included 34 young adults (24 women and 10 men, between the ages of 19 and 33 years old) and 28 students enrolled at secondary schools (17 females and 11 males, between the ages of 10 and 18). The participants were recruited from four different Muslim communities in the Netherlands, of Turkish, Moroccan, Egyptian, and Pakistani origins (see Table 1 for information on participant backgrounds). Except for one young adult who aligned himself with Sufism, all identified as Sunni Muslim. The large majority of the participants were born and raised in the Netherlands, and except for four young adults, all participants lived or studied in Amsterdam. Secondary school students were targeted in this study because, for Muslims, puberty marks a significant milestone in social, emotional, and spiritual development. During this period, young Muslims adjust to sex segregation and are expected to conform with Islamic dress codes and to observe religious rituals such as Ramadan fasting and daily prayers. This often implies curtailing interactions with the opposite sex (Zine, 2008). All students were enrolled at secondary schools in Amsterdam, the majority of them in vocational education, which is not surprising, as students with a migration background from non-Western countries tend to be overrepresented in vocational tracks (Statistics Netherlands, 2020). To broaden and enrich the data, young adults were also included in this study. At the time of data collection, they had either graduated from higher education or were still studying at

Table 1. Background of Participants

	Turkish	**Moroccan**	**Egyptian**	**Pakistani**	**Total**
Young adults					
Female	6	6	5	7	24
Male	3	2	3	2	10
Total	**9**	**8**	**8**	**9**	**34**
Secondary school students					
Female	2	6	2	7	17
Male	2	1	3	5	11
Total	**4**	**7**	**5**	**12**	**28**
Total number of participants	**13**	**15**	**13**	**21**	**62**

a university. As they had long years of education experience, they were regarded as skilled at communicating their experiences and perspectives in an open, articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Moreover, age differences between the student and young adult participants, averaging 10 years, could allow identification of any change in the content of NFIE regarding messages conveyed about boundary maintenance.

Procedure

Purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). The selection criteria included belonging to one of these four Muslim communities, as well as having received some form of NFIE while attending mainstream Dutch schools. A preliminary web search was conducted to gather information about different mosques and schools, their activities, and locations in Amsterdam. Students were mostly reached through three secondary schools and a few mosques in Amsterdam, and young adults were contacted through social media advertisements (such as through online platforms aimed at certain religious or immigrant groups) and e-mail invitations to all students enrolled in a master's program. Moreover, some additional young adults who fit the sampling criteria were suggested by the participants after their interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2017 and May 2019 by the author and two research assistants. The interviews were conducted in English, Dutch, Turkish, Arabic or Urdu, depending on the language skills and preferences of the participants. Researchers were all female and came from Muslim-majority countries (Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan), and were native speakers of Turkish, Arabic, or Urdu; only the author could speak Dutch as well. This led to some limitations during the interviews with secondary school students, particularly those with a Pakistani background. Most students possessed only a basic command of Urdu, which precluded them from being articulate about complicated topics. Parents were involved in translating Urdu into Dutch. Because of their familiarity with Islam and personal experiences with NFIE in their home countries, the researchers were viewed as insiders by the participants. At the same time, they were outsiders, since none was born and raised in the Netherlands. The researchers did not have

personal experience of what it means to grow up as a Muslim in a non-Muslim country or with NFIE in the Netherlands, nor did they attend Dutch secondary schools. The personal histories, gender, and age of the researchers helped with establishing good rapport and trust with the participants.

Interviews tended to be long, lasting between 1 to 3 hours with young adult Muslims, and 30 minutes to 1 hour with students. The shorter length of student interviews had to do with the fact that they tended to provide relatively less detail or elaboration, while the young adults were interested in lengthy reflections. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, except for those with students from a Pakistani background, who were often accompanied by a parent. The interviews took place at various locations: on university premises, at participants' schools or homes, at cafés, NFIE organizations, or public libraries. Prior to the interview, all participants were informed about the scope and objectives of the research, and consent forms were completed and signed. They were also informed that the information they shared was entirely confidential and would be used only for the purposes of this study. Active parental consent was obtained for those under the age of 16. A jointly developed interview protocol was used by all researchers to provide a common framework across the interviews, with a focus on the participants' educational trajectories, experiences with NFIE, values and norms that were conveyed to them in their NFIE, and how these values and norms compared with their observations in secondary schools. Participants were also asked how they resolved possible value conflicts and what specific strategies they have used. It is important to note that the interviews with the young adults did not focus on their higher education experiences, but instead on their experiences in secondary schools in a retrospective manner. The participants received a gift voucher or a small present as a token of appreciation.

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants, and they were fully transcribed before analysis. During transcribing, all interviews in Arabic and Urdu were translated into English to allow for analysis and interpretation by the author who supervised the overall research project. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted using a software program (Atlas.ti) on the basis of a code list developed from existing literature on the topic. The codes were revised during the process of analysis to incorporate new emerging aspects. The codes focused on four aspects: participants' experience with NFIE (such as attendance, content, learning materials, forms of religious training); the values and norms conveyed at NFIE settings about boundary maintenance; values and norms conveyed at secondary schools; and Muslim youth negotiations of value conflicts. Once coding was completed, code reports were printed out and read multiple times to identify, analyze, and interpret commonalities and patterns, and delineate contrasting viewpoints. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the article, and background information related to participant identities, schools, or mosques is omitted.

Findings

The majority of the participants received NFIE in mosques established by their own communities. They attended religious classes at least once or twice per week, on weekdays after school or on the weekends, with weekend classes often lasting 3 hours. The time invested in NFIE varied depending on students' interest and availability, type and purpose of religious

education, and mosque schedules. NFIE was not only provided at mosques. One-third of the study's Pakistani-Dutch participants opted for learning to read the Qur'an at home, because their parents were concerned about low educational quality at the mosques or about the nature of the messages conveyed there. Due to the flexible nature of home tutoring, the frequency and the length of these classes differed significantly, with most classes being described as lasting one or two hours. One participant also attended online classes with a tutor in Pakistan. Some of the participants with Moroccan and Egyptian backgrounds received NFIE at private tutoring centers. The educational materials used in NFIE consisted of the Qur'an and a range of books, mostly developed and published in Turkey, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia.

The findings from secondary school students and young adults pointed to clear differences regarding norms and values that they learned at school and during their NFIE. Children appear to have received conflicting messages and been socialized into contradictory norms on boundary maintenance between the sexes in these two different learning environments. These mainly concerned aspects of physical and social distancing, namely, sex segregation, physical touch (handshake, hugging, kissing on the cheek), eye contact, and conversing with the opposite sex. Although the theme of romantic relationships before marriage is closely intertwined with boundary maintenance, as it regards intimate interactions between boys and girls and men and women, this has been discussed at length in a separate paper (Altinyelken et al., 2022). In this section, the perspectives of the participants are presented by first focusing on their experiences in NFIE and then drawing comparisons to those at secondary school. How Muslim youth navigated these different norms and underlying values is then discussed. Discussions around their NFIE experiences will focus on mosque education, as it was the dominant form of NFIE among the participants. Moreover, several participants also commented that the emphasis on values and norms or opportunity for socialization was much stronger at mosques. Home tutoring, online lessons, or religious education at private tutoring centers tended to focus more on the fundamentals of Islam, Arabic, and memorization of the Qur'an.

Dominant Narrative of NFIE on Boundary Maintenance Between the Sexes

The majority of the participants who received mosque education associated the mosque environment with sex segregation and with a narrative that boys and girls and men and women should be physically separated. Any form of physical touch, eye contact, or conversing with the opposite sex were considered undesirable, forbidden (*haram*) in Islam or viewed as a sin, and consequently should be avoided. These norms and underlying values and principles were explicitly taught in some cases, while they were part of the hidden curriculum and mostly learned through socialization in others. Some of this might be unspoken, through mosque practices of separation of the learning spaces, building entrances, or prayer rooms. Some mosques had separate entrances to the building for girls and boys. Students with a Pakistani background noted that due to small class sizes, boys and girls shared the same classroom (with some space between them) when they were young. However, as they grew older, sex separation was practiced more strictly. They were also mostly taught by same-sex tutors, although the Pakistani-Dutch participants who received home tutoring were all instructed by male tutors. A number of participants were told that all physical contact between men and women was forbidden outside of marriage, while others were instructed that they should avoid handshaking, but eye contact or talking to the opposite sex could be acceptable. Hence, the emphasis on this issue differed per mosque. Mosque advice on sex segregation was not limited to religious spaces, but carried over to broader society as well. Basma (female young

adult, Egyptian background) was told that going to school was not appropriate since the sexes were mixed there. She did not think that this was good advice and eventually stopped going to that particular mosque.

Many participants commented that they did not really know why boys and girls were separated from one another at such a young age. Interestingly, when they were subject to such separation, they were not curious about it, either. Sex segregation was simply taken for granted, seemed appropriate, and was not questioned. As they were exposed to sex segregation in other social spaces in their community, this practice was not entirely new to them either. Hence, it was perceived as a social convention, rather than a moral concern:

> I did not think about it. It's just really normal. At school it's together and there [mosque] it's not together . . . I really remember no thought about it. I did not question it. (Deniz, male young adult, Turkish background)

Upon further inquiry, some participants tried to explain the reasoning behind sex separation. Karam suggested that boys in his class made a lot of noise, and mosque tutors probably wanted to avoid girls being distracted as well. He also believed that girls and boys were different by nature and needed different teaching approaches:

> Girls need a bit more time and are more emotional . . . Girls need more understanding, and you have to feel like she is really emotional. If you yell at her, she will be crushed. And, maybe if you yell at a boy, it won't be a problem. (Karam, male young adult, Moroccan background)

Mido (male student, Egyptian background) confirmed that boys studied together with girls until the age of 10 and then they were separated. He believed this was not a religious rule, but a norm adopted to "prevent desire and lust between the sexes." He reasoned that separation was aimed at preventing undesirable interactions and ensuring better concentration, focus and motivation during lesson times. Mehmet (male young adult, Turkish background) stated that similar concerns underlined the decision to separate prayer rooms as well. He believed that imams were often concerned that in mixed spaces, men would get distracted, implying a deep mistrust:

> It's like as if when men would see a woman, they would instantly get feelings . . . I understand the reasoning, but I also feel like you don't trust men. Perhaps it was like that 1400 years ago . . . I think they have this view that men cannot control their urges. That troubles me. (Mehmet, male young adult, Turkish background)

For others, sex segregation was a norm dictated by Islam and ordained by God. Basma (female young adult, Egyptian background) noted that "If we are going to follow the religion, . . . we have to be separate." For Sabreen (female young adult, Moroccan background), enforcing sex segregation at a young age had to do with training children for adulthood: "Perhaps they wanted to prepare the children for when they are adults." Firuze (female young adult, Turkish background) believed that sex segregation was a positive practice. She felt much more comfortable in sex-segregated environments at the mosque. She tended to feel more vulnerable while praying and reported seeing fellow worshipers cry. It felt safer to go through such special experiences only among other women.

It is important to note that sex segregation and avoidance of physical contact tended to converge with home culture and the participants' upbringing, most strongly among Pakistani participants. As Zine (2008) confirmed, such social aspects of proper behavior and conduct

are often regulated within homes and the community much more than adherence to the five pillars of Islam. Some participants were not sure if sex segregation or curtailing contact with the opposite sex was dictated by Islam or by their own culture. Many also pointed out the difficulties of drawing clear boundaries between religion and culture, as the two converged strongly. Nonetheless, in some cases Muslim parents appeared to be more liberal on this issue compared to the mosque and guided their children differently.

Secondary School Ethos and Norms

When asked about their experiences at school, almost all participants reported that the conservative religious ethos on sex segregation collided with secular school values and norms. Except for a few participants who studied at Islamic primary schools, all participants attended coeducational schools and classrooms at both the primary and secondary levels. Boys and girls shared learning spaces and were mixed in the cafeteria, the library, the laboratory, or on the playground. In some cases, they were deliberately seated together as part of school policies. The participants also noted that their teachers tried to promote collaboration and interactions between boys and girls through group work and joint presentations. Gymnastics and swimming classes were often (but not always) mixed, and in some cases boys and girls were even expected to share showers. In fact, the participants often referred to Dutch society as "too liberal" and "too free":

> In the mosque you get the message that you should separate gender. So, men and women should not interact unless it is necessary. Whereas in high school you get the message that you can interact whenever you want with whoever you want. And, there is no barrier between men and women except in gym classes. (Shirine, female young adult, Egyptian background)

The participants also explained that they received different messages on handshaking. While religious education communicated to them that handshaking between sexes was wrong, they observed that this was expected as part of social etiquette in Dutch society. At school before the start of the lessons, teachers often greeted each other and students with a handshake. Imane (female student, Moroccan background) confirmed that while she was taught that handshaking or talking to a man directly was not right in Islam, her school was against avoidance of such contact. Fatma (female young adult, Moroccan background) also explained that although handshaking indicated respect and was seen as a welcoming attitude in Dutch society, in some Muslim countries, if you want to show respect, you should refrain from touching. As the symbolic meaning and value of this gesture diverged between the two cultures, in some cases it tended to lead to misunderstandings, tension, and even antagonism. Hence, there was a visible and felt collision between the norms dictated by mosque and school, which sometimes arose during parent-teacher meetings. According to Islamic rules of privacy and seclusion, a male adult or adolescent should not be in a closed room alone with an unrelated woman; a third person needs to be present as well. This meant that a male teacher was not supposed to have a meeting with a mother in private.

Based on the accounts of the participants, Figure 1 illustrates the different values and norms regarding boundary maintenance between sexes. While this figure helps to demarcate the differences, it should be kept in mind that not all NFIE institutions require sex-segregated learning environments or entrances, and not all schools deliberately facilitate interactions among sexes or require handshaking before class.

Non-formal Islamic education	Mainstream secondary schools
Sex-segregated learning environments	Coeducational learning environments
Separate classrooms for boys and girls	Mixed classes for boys and girls
Seating of girls and boys in different parts of the room when separate classrooms are not available	Mixed seating arrangements
No interaction between opposite sexes during learning	Interaction encouraged through mixed group work, joint presentations, and projects
Refraining from touching the opposite sex	Teachers and students shake hands before classes start
Separate entrances at some mosques	All entrances mixed
Sex segregation in other spaces within mosques (e.g., areas allocated to prayer or garden where students can spend time during breaks)	Mixed-sex arrangements for all spaces within the school except for toilets (e.g., schoolyard, sports hall, cafeteria, library, laboratories)
Sex-segregated spaces within the mosque used by imams and religious education tutors	Mixed teacher staff rooms

Figure 1. Comparison between NFIE and Secondary Schools

Distinct Pathways for Navigating Value Conflict

Having reported encountering contradictory values and norms on boundary maintenance between the sexes, some participants expressed confusion and disorientation. They did not know how to manage these competing cultural expectations. Basma (female young adult, Egyptian background) noted that continual exposure to conflicting values confuses Muslim youth: "Like, I have to do what now?" Sana (female young adult, Pakistani background) remarked that the attitudes of native Dutch peers also influence Muslim youth, compounding their sense of confusion:

> Because you are quite influenced by them [peers]. If you enter such a group in high school . . . you will learn from them and copy them. Which, now that I see it, hurts me a lot. That nowadays girls and boys, their parents themselves are confused.

Several participants noted that they resorted to some significant others for guidance and support, especially their parents, older siblings, and (in some cases) mosque tutors. Not surprisingly, parental codes and messaging were often aligned with the values and norms conveyed at their NFIE. In fact, when these collided significantly, parents tended to withdraw their children from NFIE. The study identified four main pathways among the participants as they negotiated competing values and norms on this subject: conformity to religious values, code-switching, peer surveillance, and breaking away.

Conformity to religious values. For some students, mosque messaging on this topic was decisive and they tried to behave accordingly. Although they could comply with the Islamic code within their own communities, some experienced difficulties at school settings. In this context, handshaking came up as an issue. None of the participants involved in this study avoided handshaking with their teachers, but they witnessed two male classmates who refused to do so

with their female teachers. In one case, the conflict was resolved by agreeing to hand-waving instead of handshaking. Furthermore, once socialized into sex segregation at the mosque, some participants encountered difficulties with being around the opposite sex at school. This was mainly raised by female participants. Ibtisam (female young adult, Egyptian background) felt uncomfortable about mixed gymnastics classes at school, while for Suraya (female young adult, Pakistani background) swimming lessons were the most difficult, for which she needed to find an excuse each time not to participate. Yet, she took part in dance classes, since all the other Muslims girls were "doing it too" and she did not want to appear too conservative. Nonetheless, she felt rather uncomfortable, feeling ashamed and embarrassed because of being close to boys.

Code-switching. The majority reported that they accepted schools and mosques as entirely different learning spaces with different norms and values, without much need for reasoning or questioning on this issue. Consequently, they adopted different norms and values with different people in different circumstances. At the mosque, they remained seated in their sex-segregated learning spaces or assigned spots within a shared room. At school, they simply attended mixed classrooms and took part in group work when they were instructed by teachers to accomplish a task collectively. A male student would not choose to sit next to a female student on his own, but if he was instructed to do so, then the student could do so without feeling seriously conflicted. Likewise, at the mosque, females abstained from interacting with boys or handshaking, while at school they shook hands with their male teachers as they entered the classroom:

> I can do this switch . . . If I am with Muslims it is okay to say that I don't shake hands, but if I am with the Dutch, I can shake hands, because I know for them this is normal. But I know for Muslims this is not normal. So, I will be someone different here and there. (Basma, female young adult, Egyptian background)

Shirine (female young adult, Egyptian background) was at ease with code switching; she could manage different aspects of her identity. Her core stayed the same even if her performative-self changed in different contexts. The difficulty arose when the two worlds collided. She also added that code-switching was not difficult for her because she was not confused about her own convictions and values. She did not believe in the mosque's narrative about boundary maintenance but acted accordingly in the mosque environment for pragmatic reasons. Nonetheless, she also admitted that she observed a lot of stress in her brother and among her Muslim friends. Their stress had to do with the "fear of being discovered as a fraud" by family, peers, mosque tutors, or schoolteachers.

Peer surveillance. The participants discussed how collective agency was used to ensure compliance by Muslim peers. Fatima (female young adult, Egyptian background) considered herself "a masculine adolescent" and it came very naturally and easily to her to socialize with boys: "I was always chilling with the boys." Although she used to feel comfortable socializing with boys in primary school, she observed stark differences when she started attending secondary school. It was no longer easy for her to spend time with boys even though she was not attending a Muslim-majority school. She experienced some judgmental attitudes and social pressure from her Muslim peers:

> People [Muslim peers] think you are a girl, you can't be with boys, you can't sit all day with boys. Otherwise, you will be a whore . . . They are watching you, and they were like, 'Oh, you are sitting there' [with boys].

Fatima thought the Muslim girls who judged her at the time would also have liked interacting with boys, but did not do it because they were raised to believe that it was not appropriate.

The social control Muslim students appeared to exert over one another did not apply to native Dutch peers. Two of the secondary schools that participants attended were Muslim-majority schools. Students from these schools also confirmed the existence of social control among Muslim peers; some criticisms and admonitions when trespassing norms were observed, including warnings regarding the boundaries transgressors need to maintain.

Breaking away. Some young Muslims, however, did not accept or believe in the conservative teachings while they attended NFIE or afterwards as they grew up past adolescence. Asli (female young adult, Turkish background) remarked, "I disagreed with everything I heard at the mosque," and reported that she felt frustrated and angry. Other young Muslims developed a critical stance against sex segregation over the years after they completed their NFIE. Mehmet (male young adult, Turkish background) questioned if contact avoidance between men and women was dictated by the Qur'an:

> Why is it still bad to shake hands with women even though in the current time it has an entirely different meaning perhaps than it had back then? You know, the social rules are just very different. So, there is this struggle. Even though I still believe today, I am religious, but there are struggles that I am dealing with.

Shirine (female young adult, Egyptian background) opposed sex segregation in prayer rooms and commented that she would not give such a message to her children in the future. She enjoyed befriending and spending time with male peers and considered handshaking a reasonable compromise: "You live in a country where everything is open. Everything is ok. So, you have to give and take." At the same time, she was convinced that greeting a man with a kiss on the cheek clearly contradicted Islamic norms: "In the Dutch norms, it is very normal . . . Then, I find it hard to say no, because I know it is not sexual. But I still don't feel okay with it." Some other participants also suggested that considering our modern times and the fact that they lived in the Dutch society, mixed-sex classes would have been more appropriate at the mosque. Some young adults also confirmed that breaking away from parental and religious codes was more feasible once they became independent and no longer depended on their parents for housing or financial support.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that while NFIE might use persuasive pedagogies to promote a conservative religious ethos among young Muslims in the Netherlands, it is contested at school sites through some diametrically opposed norms, values, and practices. While educational activities on mosque premises tend to observe sex segregation and convey messages about the undesirable nature of physical touch or gaze or conversing with the opposite sex (particularly after puberty), mainstream schools in the Netherlands are all co-educational and interactions between girls and boys during or out of lesson hours are viewed as natural and positive. Despite the average of 10 years difference between the students and young adults who took part in this study, there were no noteworthy variations in their accounts. Nonetheless, young adults reflected upon these issues at length and voiced critical stances about the assumptions and underlying premises of the purportedly religious dogma, or the way in which it was taught to them during their NFIE training. The way that the norms and the underlying principles of sex segregation were discussed by the participants is aligned with the previous literature (Beekers & Schrijvers, 2020; Ider, 2019; Wray et al., 2014). However, this is the first study—to our knowledge—that compares these distinct values and norms between mainstream secondary schools and NFIE settings.

The study also highlights how Muslim children and youth use their agency and develop strategies to manage the competing sets of values conveyed through schools and mosques. Some participants were able to establish alignment between their attitudes and behaviors, as they were able to refrain from physical touch or distance themselves from the opposite sex as much as possible. Yet others, despite believing in the gender precepts, felt compelled to adapt to the rules and expectations at school. Compartmentalization of mosques and schools as entirely different realms with their distinct sets of norms and values was common, and this eased participants' code-switching in formal (secular) and non-formal (religious) learning settings. There was also peer surveillance to make sure Muslim youth observed proper etiquette in their dealings with the opposite sex. Such social regulation was facilitated by peers through a watchful and disciplinary gaze (Zine, 2008). The emphasis on sex segregation at mosques illustrates organizational strategies to avoid contact between the sexes through avoidance and monitoring (Williams et al., 2017). Although the literature points to how such practices are justified on the basis of preventing *illicit* romantic or sexual entanglements before marriage, in this study there was also much emphasis on concentration on studies, learning outcomes, and gender-specific learning styles and needs as the reasoning behind sex segregation.

In addition, various participants articulated their confusion and ongoing struggle at sensemaking and finding their paths. In this way, the study corroborates earlier studies about the sense of confusion and in-betweenness (Wong et al., 2017) and "being pulled in opposite directions" (Yip et al., 2011, p. 22), or concerns about "how to relate to such diverging expectations" (Bøe, 2018, p. 279). Some of the strategies employed by the participants helped them to consolidate their social support and collective self-determination, but some might lead to increased vulnerability to mental health distress (e.g., secrecy, living a double life, maintaining different identities and selves, fear of being found out as a fraud), social isolation (breaking up with family or the community), or condemnation and rejection by the peer group (Cense, 2014; Wong et al., 2017). These narratives underscore the psychological burden of cultural adaptation while living between different life-worlds in the West (Adam & Ward, 2016; Goforth et al., 2014). Nonetheless, existing debates and research have tended to underscore apprehensions about security, social integration, and citizenship development, while the consequences of growing up and living with contradictory sets of values and norms for the psycho-social development and mental health of Muslim youth have received much less attention (Goforth et al., 2014; Stuart, 2014).

The number of Muslim children in the Netherlands, the polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the controversy regarding NFIE have increased in recent decades (Sözeri, 2021; ter Avest, 2014). Consequently, the compatibility between conservative Islamic practices and secular education is being put to the test. Schools and NFIE are learning spaces where societal tensions can be played out, mirroring the developments within the broader society. Moreover, these learning spaces can also contribute to tensions and value conflicts in conscious and unconscious ways, aggravating polarization, and undermining the cultural and social integration process of new generations of religious believers. At the same time, depending on their ethos and pedagogy, schools and mosques could offer safe places where such polarization and value conflicts are reflected upon, negotiated, and resolved, thereby enhancing mutual understanding, promoting the values of respect for diversity, and making a positive contribution to the socialization of Muslim youth (see Miedema & ter Avest, 2011).

Implications

This study highlights the necessity for having open discussions at home, school settings, and various NFIE spaces on young Muslims' exposure to competing cultural demands and their

struggles to meet these pressures. Parents, schoolteachers, and mosque tutors need to encourage and facilitate such reflections on young Muslims' lived experiences, interactions with religious and secular cultures, and their ways of addressing value conflicts. Such engagement is important to support young Muslims' education, socio-emotional wellbeing, and cultural socialization. Likewise, social workers or school psychologists interacting with Muslim youth need to improve their knowledge and awareness about the impact of NFIE on young Muslims in general, and about how religious faith impacts their values, attitudes, and experiences. Such open discussions, engagement, and greater awareness are indispensable for formulating policy and practice that acknowledge the dilemmas of young Muslims and offer consistent advice, support, and guidance (Yip & Page, 2013). By offering insights into the lived experiences of Muslim youth, the findings of this study might inform curricular and pedagogical approaches at schools and mosques, and counseling services provided by schools or mental health institutions. In schools where there are few Muslim students, their needs might be virtually invisible. However, in schools where they are the majority, such needs might have to be considered more thoroughly. In Muslim-majority schools, value conflicts and coping strategies could be taught as part of the school curriculum to promote self-understanding and to empower Muslim youth. Furthermore, some young adults underscored the need for alternative religious education spaces that move away from a fear-based pedagogy and prescriptions for how Muslim youth ought to live their lives. Instead, they advocated for NFIE spaces that inform Muslim youth about the diversity of Islamic traditions (e.g., different perspectives on boundary maintenance between the sexes), and respect and uphold their autonomy to make their own individual choices.

Conclusion

This study contributed to our knowledge and understanding about the lived experiences of Muslim youth in Europe and gave voice to young people's perspectives and reflections with regard to boundary maintenance between the sexes. Comparing the learning and socialization processes at NFIE with experiences at secondary schools is highly relevant for understanding Muslim youth's cultural integration processes, their struggles, and strategies. Such knowledge and improved understanding are crucial for developing and implementing adequate policies supporting their wellbeing and mental health, which in turn have major implications for their academic success, future life prospects, and socialization. The qualitative nature of this research provides in-depth understandings of Muslim youth's viewpoints and experiences that is often omitted in scholarly studies (Scourfield et al., 2013) or in media representations (Sözeri et al., 2019). However, due to its small sample size and the reliance on interviews, the study cannot make claims as to how representative these experiences and views are across Muslim youth in the Netherlands. This is an important point to underline because there are competing discourses about Islamic ethos. Future research can overcome these limitations by including a much larger sample size across the country and by triangulating the subjective evidence derived from qualitative studies with quantitative approaches.

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